

LINCOLN UNDER
ENEMY FIRE



ABRAHAM LINCOLN AS HE APPEARED SHORTLY BEFORE THE ATTACK ON WASHINGTON, FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW B. BRADY NOW OWNED BY FREDERICK HILL MESERVE.

LINCOLN UNDER ENEMY FIRE

*The Complete Account of
His Experiences During
Early's Attack on
Washington*

By
JOHN HENRY CRAMER

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DEDICATED TO
Professor J. G. Randall and
Mr. Justice Felix Frankfurter

PREFACE

TWO MID-JULY afternoons of 1864 do not occupy an important place in the life history of Abraham Lincoln, although they were the only times on which a President of the United States was exposed to the gunfire of an enemy force. Two exciting days in the life of a chief executive are but faintly sketched on the panorama of the history of a nation, for the skirmishes on the outskirts of rambling Washington City have no importance comparable to that of the grim, desperate battles at Antietam, Gettysburg, and Vicksburg. The attack on the Capital City is of slight import to historians of the present day, but in 1864 it meant much to the people of the North.

In the summer of that year, a Confederate army under the leadership of General "Jube" Early moved out from Lynchburg, swept through the Shenandoah Valley, and marched on Washington. A momentary feeling of panic swept the city at the approach of the Southern army, but there was none of the wild hysteria of the first days of the war. President Lincoln was disturbed over the threat to the imperfectly protected city, but he was busy also with plans for bag-

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ging the forces of Early. He toyed at first with the idea of recalling General Ulysses S. Grant from Virginia, and the Northern "bulldog" wrote that he might lead the army in person to a defense of Washington. But, on sober second thought, Grant decided it was best to concentrate his energies on the offensive against the army of Robert E. Lee.

Although Lincoln remained calm in the face of danger, he did not underestimate the importance of the thrust against Washington. He visited Fort Stevens and other defenses of the city on three successive days, and watched with intense interest as Union soldiers fought to hold the Capital.

On two of his visits to Fort Stevens, the gaunt giant from the Illinois prairies was under fire of Confederate marksmen, and a "saga" of President Lincoln under fire has arisen from the accounts of these occasions.

Many different anecdotes concerning the incidents have found their way into print, and it is possible that others lie hidden in the pages of old letters, diaries, newspapers, and magazines. The most colorful of these tales has been woven around a meeting of two of the most outstanding figures in American history: Abraham Lincoln and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. In this picturesque account, the President is revealed as facing not only Confederate gunfire, but the verbal fire of a young army captain who was to become one of the most distinguished members of the Supreme Court of the United States. Many people have accepted the entertaining anecdote without questioning its au-

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thenticity, but there are men, even now, who are skeptical of its veracity.

The varied accounts included in this volume have undergone a slight analysis, but no definite conclusions are offered as to the authenticity of each anecdote. The evidence is adduced, and the reader may derive his own conclusions from it.

JOHN HENRY CRAMER

Lincoln Tower
Cleveland, Ohio
June 16, 1946

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

IT IS a trite saying but a true one: no book is the work of one man. It is the co-operative endeavor of many minds and hands, and this volume could not have been written without the assistance of many persons. These have given generously of both time and effort to contribute to the knowledge of the "saga" of a President under fire.

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The nearly unknown letter of David T. Bull, the first letter about the President under fire, is used with the permission of Professor Sleeter Bull, a member of the faculty at the University of Illinois.

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As fitting conclusion, the author wishes to reveal a special indebtedness to Professors James G. Randall and Mark DeWolfe Howe. These men have played almost as great a part in the writing of this volume as the author. Professor Howe suggested a complete study of the history of President Lincoln at Fort Stevens, and his suggestion led to discovery of many interesting and little-known anecdotes.

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JOHN HENRY CRAMER

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I
ATTACK ON WASHINGTON,
1864

JULY 3, 1863: An angry sun glared down on angrier men below. Stifling heat rose from the wheat fields, but at moments a gentle west wind stirred the grain. The roar of the cannon had died away; the Union guns had slackened their fire; momentarily the field lay silent. Tense and ready, courageous Confederate infantrymen awaited the command to charge. Behind the lines, a doubtful general paced back and forth. James Longstreet had argued with Lee against taking the offensive here but had been overruled. Still reluctant, he delayed ordering an advance but finally sent the word; the gray legions under General George E. Pickett swept across the field. As they advanced, a hundred Federal cannon broke silence. The Southerners drove on in a magnificent charge, facing the raking fire with coolness and determination. But now, Northern guns began to cut wide gaps in the ranks. As a hail of shells struck the Confederate army, it reeled, dazed and stunned by

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the withering fire of Union artillery. A stone wall at Gettysburg had marked the high tide of the Confederacy; the broken waves of Pickett's retreating men marked its doom. On July 4, General Ulysses S. Grant occupied Vicksburg, and the Confederacy staggered under the impact of a powerful one-two blow. The South had been placed on the defensive, but it was to continue the hopeless struggle against overwhelming odds.

One year had passed since the moment of the brave but futile charge at Gettysburg; July days had come again. Deep in the South, a fiery, redheaded Union general was pushing relentlessly forward on a march that would split the South and quarter it. Further north, a crafty Confederate tactician plotted to stem the onrush of a relentless opponent. Like a masterful boxer, Robert E. Lee used all the science at his command. He feinted, sidestepped, stabbed at his more rugged opponent, and drove in to deliver as solid blows as those inflicted on him. But Grant moved on with dogged persistence. He lost many men and gained some ground but failed to edge by Lee toward Richmond. The Northern newspapers raged against "Butcher" Grant, but such journalistic hysteria did not budge the General. After a bloody repulse at Cold Harbor, he changed his plans and, moving southward over the James, tried to come at Richmond through the back door—Petersburg.

Radical Republicans were critical of the Lincoln administration and demanded the removal of Grant. War-weary Northerners clamored for peace, but

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such defection in the North offered little encouragement to Lee. He knew he was waging a desperate war, but, as is characteristic of a great man, he was determined to go down fighting. Being a wise soldier, Lee knew that he could not continue to take the sledge-hammer blows of a stronger opponent. Sooner or later, his forces would crumble under the impact of these power drives. Measures must be taken to divert the attention of Grant; the pressure on the Army of Northern Virginia must be relieved.

Robert E. Lee recalled earlier days of the war, and pondered a counterblow against the North. He remembered well the Southern victory at the first battle of Bull Run, and the hysteria of the Washington citizens as they envisioned a march on the city by the triumphant Confederate legions. Washington had trembled then; the fear of God might again be put into that city. And now came memories of his ablest lieutenant, a great leader of swiftly marching men. The stanch old Presbyterian, "Stonewall" Jackson, had prayed hard and fought harder in the Shenandoah Valley. Northern generals had come to fear his sudden and devastating attacks. Another march down the beautiful Shenandoah Valley might throw Washington City into panic once again. But Lee had no Jackson now; that stout soldier of God had passed over the river to rest under the shade of the trees at Chancellorsville, and a man of his capacities was not easily replaced.

Lee thought of his lieutenants; though he had no Jackson, he had Jubal A. Early. "Old Jube" might

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lack the military genius of "Stonewall," but he wanted neither the drive nor the audacity of the more famed general. Kyd Douglas, who rode with both men, declared that no other man but Jackson would have faced such odds as Early did on the march to Washington. Early was ready and willing to attempt the dash down the Valley, and Lee needed him.

Lee had a double purpose in sending Early down the Valley; he hoped that a "hysterical" North would demand the recall of part of Grant's army, and he had a score to settle with General David Hunter. That old friend of Abraham Lincoln had stormed through Virginia, spreading destruction as he marched; he must be stopped. Although his Second Corps had been engaged in active service in the field for forty days, "Jube" Early struck with the lightning speed of a Jackson. His men marched eighty miles in four days, rested a moment, and went on to meet Hunter, who was threatening Lynchburg. Sixty miles were covered in two days. From Lynchburg, Early moved out to attack Hunter, but the Yankee had wisely decided to retreat. Early struck the Union rear guard at Liberty, but Hunter was moving too fast to be caught. On moved the pursuing Southerners—sixty miles in three days—but there was a limit even to the endurance of Confederate soldiers. Early rested his weary men, and Hunter escaped into the Virginia mountains.

Early rested for twenty-four hours and was off again, with Lexington, Virginia, as his destination. The town was the burial place of the noted "Stone-

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wall" Jackson, and the army paused to do him honor. As a regimental band played a mournful dirge, thousands of his veterans filed past the grave of their great commander. Once before they had raged through the Valley, striking fear into Northern hearts; now, they were marching to do it again. Ceaselessly they plodded on, reaching Staunton on June 26. Here Early stopped, and with good reason. Half of his infantry and many of his officers were without shoes. The weather did not affect their feet, but experience had taught them that Northern roads were most unkind to unshod troops. The impatient General called on Richmond to send shoes to Staunton; they did not arrive. Undismayed, Early set out with his barefoot men, leaving wagons behind to bring up the needed footgear.

General Franz Sigel and a Union army lay athwart the path, but Early was not to be deterred. On July 2, he marched on Winchester, and fear gripped the Union army and the North. Sigel called for reinforcements and, on July 2, 1864, telegraphed the War Department: "There are strong indications of a movement of the enemy in force down the Valley. Our cavalry met those of the enemy today at Winchester, and a number of refugees have arrived here who fled from that place, and say that Early with three divisions was moving toward Strasburg last night." ¹

¹ *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. 1, Vol. XXXVII, Pt. 1, p. 175.

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Swiftly Early drove forward, and refugees fleeing before him soon reported him as marching to attack Martinsburg, West Virginia. Sigel met the Confederate forces at that point, but, after a brief skirmish, evacuated the town. At once Early struck out for Harper's Ferry and found it abandoned on his arrival on July 4. Sigel and General Max Weber had taken a stronger position on Maryland Heights. For the moment, the Union army was safe in strong fortifications; Early left it penned up there, and made his way through the mountains on the road to Washington. Meantime, by way of diversion, the leader of the Confederate mounted infantry, Brigadier General John McCausland, was raiding through Maryland and fully enjoying himself. He had ridden into Hagerstown, cowed the citizenry, and left with \$20,000 which he had levied on the frightened town.

Down in Virginia, Grant concentrated on the offensive against Lee with seeming indifference to the threat against Washington. On July 2, Sigel had wired of a march on the North by a powerful Confederate force, but the dispatch does not seem to have impressed his commanding officer. As late as July 4, Grant telegraphed to General Henry W. Halleck: "Except from the dispatches forwarded from Washington in the last two days I have learned nothing which indicated an intention on the part of the rebels to attempt any northern movement."²

At that moment, Early was marching on Harper's Ferry, but Grant thought that he was still with the

² *Ibid.*, Pt. 2, p. 33.



THE OPERATIONS NEAR WASHINGTON—SCENE OF THE FIGHT IN FRONT OF FORT STEVENS. FROM AN ENGRAVING IN FRANK LESLIE'S *ILLUSTRATED WEEKLY MAGAZINE*.

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forces facing him in Virginia. Not until July 6 did Grant wire Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton of his belief that a large Confederate force was moving North, and by then "Jube" Early was trying to maneuver Sigel and Weber out of Maryland Heights in order to move directly from Harper's Ferry to Washington.

On the morning of July 7, the Confederate cavalry was sent off in the direction of Frederick, Maryland, and that night the long-awaited shoes arrived. At last the Confederates could march in relative comfort. Orders were given for a general movement the following morning, and on July 8 the entire army set out for Washington. At Baltimore, General Lew Wallace heard reports of a move on Frederick by 30,000 men under Early and Breckinridge. He decided against defense of a poorly protected town, and Early swept down on it, levying a tribute of \$200,000 on the terrified citizens. Refugees began to flee toward Baltimore and Washington; only Wallace stood between Early and the Federal Capital.

The Northern commander, who would one day write better than he fought, knew that he was badly outnumbered and beset with an ill-assorted army of green recruits and veterans. There were men from the Third Maryland Infantry, the Potomac Home Brigade, the Eleventh Maryland Infantry, and the Ohio National Guard; most of them 100-day volunteers with little or no actual battle experience. Sprinkled among this motley force were a few veterans from the Eighth Corps, and 3,000 seasoned

fighters from the Third Division of the fighting Sixth Corps. Grant had awakened from his lethargy at last; on July 6 he had dispatched General James B. Ricketts with the Third Division to Baltimore. The troops had disembarked on July 8, and rushed to the assistance of the small army under Wallace. The arrival of Ricketts encouraged Wallace, but it made him no match for the oncoming Early. Although Early estimated the force of his opponent at 10,000 men, it seems to have numbered only about 6,000 (Early had 14,000 to 15,000 men). At best, the odds were stacked against Wallace and he knew it. He could hope only to fight a delaying battle, and permit reinforcements from Grant to come to the defense of Washington.

Hurriedly marching through the night, Wallace took up a position on the left bank of the Monocacy River, and prepared to offer resistance to the Confederate army. He did not have long to wait, for on the morning of July 9, Early marched confidently out of Frederick. His artillery opened fire at once, and the audacious McCausland dashed forward to turn the Union flank. Now, Early ordered General John B. Gordon to finish the work McCausland had begun. Gordon hurled his troops against the first line of the enemy; they went through, broke it, and advanced against a second line. A third loomed ahead; the intrepid Confederates smashed forward, scattered the unorganized Union troops with one volley, and swept across the Monocacy. At the same time, the Confederates threw themselves at the

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veteran Third Division. A first charge was repulsed by Ricketts, as was a second, but the Confederates poured in a steady fire on the courageous veterans of the Sixth Corps. At last, with a fourth of his men killed, wounded, or missing, Wallace ordered a retreat toward Baltimore. Ricketts covered it well, as Early swept unimpeded toward Washington. Baltimore was in a state of alarm on the arrival of Wallace; the approach of cavalry forces under Bradley Johnson had been reported. But the city did not give way to hysteria; loyal citizens by the thousands took up arms, were organized, and did yeoman work on defense.

In Washington, all had been calm at the first word of the approach of Early. Invasion was an old tale to them; they had listened to the cry of "wolf!" all too often. But the defeat of Wallace shook them out of their complacent state. Suddenly the War Department bustled about, flashing orders here, there, everywhere. Such energy could not fail to impress the people, but they remained calm in the conviction that the strong Washington fortifications offered ample security against a Confederate attack. They did not know, as the military men did, that the garrison of Washington was made up of semi-invalids of the Veteran Reserves and green 100-day men from Ohio and elsewhere. As the Confederates marched more slowly toward Washington, the War Department made frenzied appeal for fighting men. Telegraph keys clicked off hurried orders to forts in the area surrounding Washington, and Halleck

wired Grant for reinforcements. After promising to send the Nineteenth Corps and the balance of the Sixth Corps, the Union Commander wired Halleck: ". . . If the President thinks it advisable that I should go to Washington in person I can start in an hour after receiving notice leaving everything here on the defensive."³

The President consulted with Halleck who advised him that the 8,000 100-day men and invalids could defend Washington, but not Baltimore. He suggested that Grant make provisions to claw and chew on the Virginia line, but that he come in person to Washington. It was a suggestion, not an order, and Grant remained in Virginia.

In the meantime, the 8,000 men composing the "army" made ready for the defense of the Capital. Hard-bitten veterans, green militiamen, hale and hearty troops, and convalescents had been pressed into service. Halleck and General Christopher C. Augur had scraped the bottom of the barrel to save Washington. Halleck was contemptuous of Ohio militiamen who could scarcely fire a gun, but was willing to make use of their services. Even government clerks and employees were called to arms; guns had been distributed to them on July 10, and Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs was champing at the bit, eager to lead his civilian force into action. Such an ill-assorted force might hold Washington, but Halleck was in need of trained privates, men seasoned in the grim science of war. Brigadier General

³ *Ibid.*, 134.

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J. R. West offered his services to Halleck, and received the following rather facetious reply: "We have five times as many generals here as we want, but are greatly in need of privates. Any one volunteering in that capacity will be thankfully received." ⁴

At the moment, Halleck's humor, like that of Abraham Lincoln, cloaked a feeling of despair. He could not find trained men. In the emergency, he was forced to call on invalids of the Veterans Reserve, government clerks and employees, old soldiers in hospitals, convalescents, and dismounted cavalrymen. These were hurriedly organized into provisional regiments and sent to man the Washington forts. As a last resort, mechanics, government agents, clerks, overseers, and laborers in the Quartermaster General's Department were sent into the trenches. Halleck felt no great security as he looked over the "army"; he felt that it could defend Washington, but could it hold out until Grant's reinforcements arrived? Grant had sent word of the departure of the Sixth Corps, but even now Early was moving on Washington.

At daybreak on July 10, Early set his army in motion, and after a march of twenty miles, rested, four miles from Rockville. The ever-active McCausland moved on ahead, met a Union cavalry force at Rockville, had a brisk engagement with Federals, and drove them off. Behind him, Early marched more cautiously after learning that the Third Division under Ricketts was with Wallace. No rain had fallen

⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

for several weeks, and clouds of dust hid the columns of marching men. Oppressive heat sapped their energies; they had obtained little rest on the march; they paused. At daylight on July 11, however, Early was on the move again, pushing steadily toward the Capital, hoping to get into the fortifications before reinforcements from Grant could arrive. He was gambling for high stakes, and some military experts of the Civil War believe that he might have won had he played his cards correctly. A quickened pace might have gained the day, but the Confederate troops had forced their marches beyond the limits of human endurance; they were exhausted. No air stirred about them; the sun beat down; dust rose to suffocate the men and impede their march. Early realized the obstacles in his way, for he wrote: "On the morning of the 11th we continued the march, but the day was so exceedingly hot, even at a very early hour in the morning, and the dust so dense, that many of the men fell by the wayside, and it became necessary to slacken our pace." ⁵

Weary but undismayed, the courageous Southerners marched on. They were striking for the Seventh Street pike which ran past Silver Springs into Washington. A cloud of dust arose, then another. A keen-eyed courier of the Eighth Illinois looked at the dust columns, mounted his horse, and rode to report at Fort Stevens. The Confederates were marching down the Seventh Street road. At the same time, refugees, fleeing before Early, swarmed into the city.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Pt. 1, p. 348.

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They had a host of wild tales for the people: a force of thirty to forty thousand men was sweeping down on them; the entire countryside was colored with gray uniforms. Momentarily, terror invaded Washington. The soldier supply was drained low. The President ordered out ten companies of District of Columbia militiamen, and sent his own bodyguard into action for the first time.

Grimly the Confederate troops advanced, until the sunlit dome of the Capitol came within their view. They had struck close to the heart of Washington City. Pickett had reached high tide at Gettysburg, but no force of Confederates had penetrated as close to the Northern Capital City as the hard-marching veterans under Early. Only the strong fortifications of Washington and a scarecrow army lay between Early and his objective. Southern horsemen rode forward to drive a Union cavalry force into the woods on Seventh Street, and Early marched past the country home of Postmaster General Blair at Silver Springs. Shortly after noon of July 11, the Confederate army came into view near Fort Stevens; apparently Early had won the race for Washington. At once he rode forward to ascertain the strength of the defensive force, and found the works but feebly manned. Though an inexperienced army had been rushed to the defenses of the city, Washington was not wholly unprepared to receive Jubal Early. From the walls of its stout forts, heavy guns frowned down on the Southerners. Moreover, the Union soldiers were in the hands of a capable leader; for, on the

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beyond were the works on the Georgetown pike which had been reported to be the strongest of all. On the left, as far as the eye could reach, the works appeared to be of the same impregnable nature.⁶

Such defenses were enough to cause Early to pause; the stout walls of those forts might prove more than a match for his tired army. His men had been exhausted by two days of hard marching, and many had fallen by the wayside, stricken down by a cruel sun. Confederate legions reported by hysterical refugees were a myth; two thirds of the army of 10,000 men were unfit for action. Early looked on his weary men; he gazed solemnly at the forts before him: assault on the defenses of Washington would be extremely costly. Wisely he desisted from attack, although he was reluctant to give up hope of taking a prize that had seemed within his grasp. But the odds were against him, for even as he planned his next move against the city, more hardened veterans of the Sixth Corps were landing on the wharves at Washington. Again Early looked on the forts, and he decided to probe their strength with a series of reconnaissances in force. At once he issued orders to the infantry to drive in a picket line near Fort Stevens. Green 100-day volunteers from Ohio made up the line; they would be no match for the men who had marched with Jackson. As the Confederate veterans advanced, young Lieutenant Colonel John N. Frazee prepared Fort Stevens for action. The inexperienced

⁶ Jubal A. Early, *Autobiographical Sketch and Narrative of the War Between the States* (Philadelphia, 1912), 390.

troops from Ohio held grimly to their ground; on marched the Southerners. At last, the Ohioans were forced to withdraw into the rifle pits, doggedly contesting every inch of ground. Dauntlessly, the Confederate skirmishers advanced within twenty rods of the fort. Withering gunfire met them, and drove them into retreat. With determination, the men re-formed the shattered line, and advanced again, this time to within 150 yards of the Union front. Frazee opened up with a bombardment of thirty-pound Parrott guns; again the Confederates fell back before the devastating fire. Now firing was heard in the vicinity of Forts Reno, Kearney, and Simmons. Veterans of the Sixth Corps listened and quickened their pace, stimulated by the sound of the guns. At three o'clock on the afternoon of July 11, General Horatio G. Wright, commanding the Sixth Corps, reported to General McCook at Fort Stevens that the advance of his corps would be up in a short time. An hour later, he dispatched the following word to the worried General Augur: "The head of my column has nearly reached the front, and at the suggestion of Major-General McCook I have directed them to bivouac at Crystal Spring, about half a mile in the rear. The enemy has been close to Fort Stevens, and, although driven back, is still not far distant. I believe it to be only a very light skirmish line, and with your permission will send a brigade out against it and try to clean it out."⁷

⁷ *War of the Rebellion: Official Records*, Ser. 1, Vol. XXXVII, Pt. 1, p. 265.

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The Confederates had been close to Fort Stevens; they would come close again. Late in the afternoon they advanced to within a thousand yards of the fort and Wright decided to clear them out. Brigadier General Frank Wheaton marched out against the Southerners, and after a brief but bitter contest sent them reeling back to the protection of their own lines. On through the afternoon and into the night the skirmishing continued. One artist of the time portrayed President Lincoln as a spectator at the nocturnal fireworks at Fort Stevens.

As day slipped into night, there was a lull in the fighting. Early had a decision to make: to fight or to withdraw. He called his able generals, Breckinridge, Gordon, Ramseur, and Rodes, into conference. "Jube" Early knew the danger of fighting against too-great odds, but he had come close to Washington, closer than any man, and he was reluctant to give up the opportunity of taking the Northern Capital. He decided on an assault at daylight of July 12, unless information should be received beforehand proving it to be folly. During the night, a dispatch arrived from General Bradley Johnson telling of the arrival of two corps from Grant's army; Johnson feared that entire army might be on the march to defend Washington. Early decided to postpone an assault until he could inspect the works in the morning.

As soon as it was light on the morning of the twelfth, Early rode forward to look over the Washington forts. As he watched, blue-clad veterans of the Sixth Corps filed in endless procession into Fort

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Stevens. Wright had made the decision for Early. It was no longer a fight; it must be withdrawal. But it would be withdrawal with the audacity of an Early; he would have a final fling at Washington. In the morning, Confederate skirmishers were ordered out and they prepared to throw a last challenge at the North. Slightly more than a thousand yards from Fort Stevens, Confederate sharpshooters in the Rives and Carberry houses poured a steady fire on Union troops. Over at Fort Slocum, keen-eyed marksmen fired on Union defenders until the big guns of the fort drove the sharpshooters to shelter. At Fort Stevens, scene of the most bitter struggle, a gala Washington crowd had gathered to watch the fighting. Late in the afternoon, the tall, thin, tired-looking President of the United States rode out to watch the battle. With genial good humor he chatted with the men, and then ascended the parapet with General Wright. Soon Confederate sharpshooters sent a steady rain of bullets on the place. Wright ordered all spectators from the parapet; Abraham Lincoln remained. The General pleaded with his Commander in Chief to get down but Lincoln stood his ground. Outside the fort, New York troops under Colonel Daniel D. Bidwell crouched tensely, awaiting the command to charge. An order was given and Bidwell's men moved forward; spectators cheered them to the echo. The moment had come; the stage was set for a dramatic meeting of two "Yankees from Olympus."



MAJOR GENERAL HORATIO D. WRIGHT OF THE UNION ARMY, COMMANDER OF THE SIXTH CORPS AT FORT STEVENS AT THE TIME OF THE ATTACK ON WASHINGTON.

II

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MYRIAD small clouds of dust arose from the sun-baked clay of Washington roads, hovered a moment in mid-air, and easily floated off to mingle with gray billows of smoke belched forth from the mouths of the heavy Parrott guns at Fort Stevens. A briefly refreshing breeze absented itself from the battlefield, and stifling blasts of July heat struck the defenders of the fort. Glistening beads of perspiration covered the faces of gunners as they loaded and fired their heavy pieces. Now and then, they hurled angry oaths at a Confederate army which had dared to venture to the gates of Washington City. Again the cannoneers fed the capacious maws of the hungry guns; the perspiration coursed more freely down dust-stained cheeks, and deep artillery tones sounded above the fury of curses. Men went grimly about their duties in the fort, for although the skirmishes upon the outskirts of the Capital were but minor engagements in a great Civil War, they were of vital importance to the gunners and veterans of the Sixth Corps.

War had become a serious business for the sea-

soned Union troops, and now they were watching a Death they knew too well stalk its tragic march through the fort. Within the stronghold, more than one defender in blue had fallen to earth, a victim of the accurate aim of Confederate marksmen. Without the walls, accurately directed shots from the great guns fell in the midst of Confederates, scattering them like tenpins.

The struggle continued through the afternoon, for although the arrival of a strong force from the Sixth Corps had caused "Jube" Early to abandon thought of a successful assault upon Washington, the Southern leader was determined to give a show of military offense. Confederate rifles snarled angrily, Union cannon thundered above them in deep tones of authority, and soldiers of North and South fell, dead or wounded. Southern marksmen kept constant vigil for unwary Union troops, and woe betide the imprudent soldier who exposed himself to their deadly fire.

Smoke drifted slowly from rifle muzzles, curled up from the cannon mouths, and wreathed the fort in clouds of gray. Gaily attired ladies and somberly dressed gentlemen watched the skirmishing from the parapet of embattled Fort Stevens. Slightly distant from the excited group, a giant figure etched itself against the gray-blue of a July sky. There were other tall men upon the parapet, but this one, clad in black, dwarfed them. Made taller by a battered stovepipe hat, he stretched upward into more than seven feet of excellent target for Confederate sharpshooters. Bul-

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lets spattered on the parapet, but the man in black remained at his post. He appeared to be undisturbed by the enemy fire. This was his first opportunity to see battle action at close range, and he meant to make the most of it.

The Confederate rifles struck crescendo; spurts of flame danced from rifle muzzles; a Union officer fell at the feet of the calm observer. The parapet was cleared of the ladies and gentlemen from the city, and the man stood alone amidst a hail of bullets. Officers suggested that he descend from his place of danger, privates pleaded that he seek safety, but the civilian did not budge.

A few feet below the parapet, and several feet distant from it, a young captain gave orders to the men within the fort. He desired no place upon the parapet; the excitement of battle had given way to grim reality for him. Washington ladies and gentlemen might cheer the charging troops, they might shout gaily as the tide of battle turned toward the North, but the young captain was not unduly excited. War had become a serious business for him, although it still retained some of its spirit of adventure. He had known nights upon the rain-drenched earth; he had gone through the discomforts of dysentery and had felt the painful sting of leaden pellets from Confederate rifles. He was intent only upon the direction of the troops, and glanced but now and then at the adventurous souls who had ridden out from the city to watch the fight. At the moment, the slender captain was bent over and did not give the impression

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of being a tall man. He straightened up suddenly, revealing a figure almost as tall as that of the civilian on the parapet. The officer glanced quickly about and saw the dark figure against the sky. It seemed incredible to the captain that any man should take a position so exposed to enemy fire. Was the fellow stark mad, or was he wholly indifferent to the death-dealing Confederate rifles? The captain was a busy man; he did not relish the added responsibility of the safety of civilians, especially foolhardy ones. Commanding troops was task enough. He glanced again at the man, and the bullets striking near him caused the captain much anxiety. Without another look he called out in a tone colored more by concern than anger, "Get down, you fool!"

That terse command may have been the only utterance ever addressed to one of the most noted products of the Illinois bar by the man who was to become one of the most illustrious members of the United States Supreme Court. The captain who called out the brusque order to the civilian on the parapet was Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and the "fool" whom he commanded to "get down" was his Commander in Chief, Abraham Lincoln.

An informal meeting of two great Americans furnishes a background for one of the more colorful tales of Civil War days. It has been fashioned from the recollections of Mr. Justice Holmes, and is an entertaining anecdote which can be appreciated by Americans to whom Abraham Lincoln and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., are but famous names in the history of the nation. Men may chuckle over the



PRESIDENT LINCOLN UNDER FIRE AT FORT STEVENS, PROBABLY JULY 12, 1864.
FROM A COVER ILLUSTRATION ON *DEFENSES OF WASHINGTON*, A PAMPHLET BY
WILLIAM VAN ZANDT COX.

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apparently impetuous words of a young officer who could term the chief executive of a nation a "fool" for unwisely exposing himself to the fire of the Confederate sharpshooters. The account of the informal introduction of Captain Holmes to Commander in Chief Lincoln offers an interesting anecdote of two of the greatest leaders produced by the nation, and in so doing, makes distinct contribution to the human-interest phase of Civil War history.

Alexander Woollcott made known to a reading public the meeting of Lincoln and Holmes by writing in his inimitable manner of the recollections of the Justice recalled to mind for Mr. Harold J. Laski. Some men were amused by the account of the apparent boldness of the young captain, but others viewed the tale of his seeming audacity with a reservation born of skepticism. There is good reason for such reservation, for more than one allegorical tale has wormed its way into the story-life of Abraham Lincoln. More than one Lincoln anecdote has failed to stand the test of thorough historical analysis. There are always skeptics who look askance at the authenticity of recollections that have aged in the wood for seventy years. Then, there are friends of Mr. Justice Holmes who do not believe that he would have addressed President Lincoln rudely, if the captain at Fort Stevens had known to whom he was speaking. Arrayed against the skeptics is a small and respected group of men and women who heard the venerable Mr. Justice Holmes recall his meeting with Abraham Lincoln.

Though the Woollcott story may appeal to many

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as the most striking account of the episode at Fort Stevens, it is only one of the several tales of the President under fire. They are to be found in the recollections of soldiers who participated in the defense of Washington, and in the reminiscences of civilians who were spectators at the scene of battle. The diary entries of a young secretary to the President afford interesting comments upon the visits to Fort Stevens, and several biographies of Abraham Lincoln present varied versions of the anecdotes about the President and the "Johnny Rebs."

It is not strange that a relatively unimportant battle of the Civil War should give rise to many tales, for it is unprecedented that the President of the nation should face the fire of enemy guns. Although he was concerned for the safety of the Capital, the Commander in Chief who faced the Confederates was a calm man. Had he known of Lincoln's presence, General Early,¹ would have chuckled no doubt over having given "Old Abe" a "good scare," but the leading citizen of Washington

¹ Jubal Anderson Early (1816-1894). Although he was a graduate of the United States Military Academy, Early devoted the better part of his life to the practice of law.

He opposed the secession of the Southern states, but, upon the withdrawal of Virginia from the Union, he entered the Confederate States Army as a colonel. He was promoted to the rank of major general in 1863, and was created a lieutenant general in 1864.

The raid through the Shenandoah Valley met with quick success, but after reaching the high-water mark of Confederate approach to Washington, the army under Early was forced into retreat by the forces under General Horatio G. Wright.

The skirmishes upon the outskirts of Washington occurred upon July 11 and 12 in 1864.

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gave no indication of being frightened as he stood on the parapet at Fort Stevens.

Judged by modern standards, the attack upon Washington did not receive prominent newspaper display, but even at the time of the Civil War it would have seemed that Lincoln's presence at Fort Stevens would have made good copy. It did not, for, strangely enough, the newspapermen of Washington devoted little space to reports about the incident. The Civil War press had attained merited distinction, and the staffs of the metropolitan dailies included correspondents such as Henry Villard, Noah Brooks, O. H. Dutton, W. P. Painter, and W. H. Smith who could have unfolded a most colorful tale of Lincoln and the Confederate sharpshooters. The Washington *Sunday Chronicle* devoted considerable space to an account of the skirmishes near Washington City, but barely mentioned the presence of Lincoln at Fort Stevens.² Another Washington newspaper contented itself with this brief reference: "President Lincoln and Secretary Seward, accompanied by one or two cavalry officers and a cavalry escort, visited the threatened defenses on Monday and yesterday."³

The recollections of men who saw Abraham Lincoln face the fire of Confederate marksmen are in marked contrast to the uninteresting accounts in the Washington newspapers. Officers high in the army, privates in the ranks, distinguished members of Washington officialdom, and little-known civilians

² Washington *Sunday Chronicle*, July 10-24, 1864.

³ Washington *Daily National Intelligencer*, July 13, 1864.

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saw the fighting at Fort Stevens. Some of them wrote of their recollections of the event within a few years after the attack upon Washington, but many waited until old age had clouded their memories of Civil War days, if not the picture of the man on the parapet. Most accounts of the exciting days at the fort were written after the death of Lincoln, but one unsung soldier was impressed enough by the sight of his Commander in Chief at Fort Stevens to record at once an unaffected narrative of his experiences in battle. While the weary President rested briefly from his duties and the tension of battle hours, a tired soldier penned this account of the days at the Washington forts:

July 14, 1864

Dear and Loving Wife:

I seat myself to pen you a few lines. I have seen exciting times since last Sunday and when I was writing to you last Sunday, I did not think that I would be called out so soon to go and see Rebs, the Johnneys we call them, but last Sunday night at halfpast twelve o'clock. we was called out and left for Fort Reno and there was put in Fort and we could see the Rebs fall on all sides. We had the Sixth Army Corps in the front a skirmishing and they soon drove them back and when they drove them back far enough our cannon opened out on them and you can bet that they run like sheep. Fort Reno is four miles from here across Maryland. After we had routed them there they went down to Fort Stevens about four miles from Fort Reno and we was ordered down there the same day and when we got there we found them hard at work. They had drove our men in 300 yards of the Fort and we laid in the rifle pits all night awaiting for the Johnneys to come up, and

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try to take the Fort but they stayed back and I tell you if they had come up we could have whipped fifty thousand and I don't think that our force was more than fifteen thousand. But a Tuesday morning, we sent out a new line of skirmishers and we stood in our rifle pits and seen some warm work about four o'clock in the evening the Johnneys massed a heavy force in front of the Fort, thinking that our force would not shell them thru fear of killing our own men. There was a large force of them gathered around a house in front of the Fort and there was a sharp shooter got up in the top of the house and thought he would kill some of our men that was on the parapets. Old Abe and his wife was in the Fort at the time and Old Abe and his doctor was standing up on the parapets and the sharp shooter that I speak of shot the doctor through the left thigh, and Old Abe ordered our men to fall back. When our men fell back far enough, the cannon in the Fort opened on them and fired the house, shelled them till they was in full retreat and then the Sixth Army Corps went after them and run them clean out of hearing. A Wednesday morning we got up and there was not a Johnney to be seen. We heard only of them that was left on the field dead or wounded and we have not seen a Johnney since and I don't think they will try any of this fort again. Fort Stevens is four miles from Washington on the Maryland side. It is a very strong fort. Well, I will say a little more. . . .⁴

⁴ David T. Bull to his wife, July 14, 1864.

The letter of David Bull is used with the kind permission of his grandson, Professor Sleeter Bull, a member of the faculty of the University of Illinois.

It seems that there is but one earlier account about Abraham Lincoln and Fort Stevens, and this is found in the diary entries of young John Hay, secretary to President Lincoln. As Hay did not accompany the President to the fort, it seems probable that David T. Bull wrote the first eyewitness narrative of battle days for Commander in Chief Lincoln.

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David T. Bull did not have the graceful prose of a Woolcott, but he had an intensity of expression that lends color to thought. Bull heard the Commander in Chief give orders, although he did not hear orders given to Lincoln. The young soldier was the first to write of the presence of Mrs. Lincoln at the fort, and was the one writer to place exactly the wound received by the doctor who stood near Lincoln.

Although this informative letter did not find its way into print, accounts of President Lincoln at Fort Stevens were not long in beating a path to the printed page. Six years after Mrs. Bull received the letter from her husband, the first printed eyewitness report of the episode appeared in the pages of a volume by a surgeon of the Sixth Corps. Dr. George Thomas Stevens had chatted with Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln on the afternoon of July 12, and he wrote this recollection of the visit:

President Lincoln and his wife drove up to the barracks unattended, except by their coachman, the superbly mounted squadron of cavalry, whose duty it was to attend his excellency being left far behind. The carriage stopped at the door of the hospital, and the President and his affable lady entered into familiar conversation with the surgeons in charge, praising the deeds of the Old Sixth Corps, complimenting the ap-

The "Sunday" of the letter was July 10, 1864, and as Bull was sent to Fort Reno after midnight of Sunday, the fighting in which he participated would have begun on Monday, July 11.

Mr. Bull erred in his identity of the wounded doctor, for it was not the physician to President Lincoln who was shot, but Surgeon C. C. V. A. Crawford of a Pennsylvania volunteer regiment.

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pearance of the veterans and declaring that they, as well as the people of the country appreciated the achievements of the wearers of the Greek cross.⁵

The President must have chuckled as the coachman left the cavalry far behind, for he liked few things better than giving the slip to his bodyguard. He and Mrs. Lincoln arrived at the fort at four o'clock in the afternoon, and about one hour later, "his excellency" went up to the parapet.

Dr. Stevens did not write of having seen the President under fire, but, while his book was still in press, he received a most interesting letter about the incident. In a footnote to the account of the skirmishes at Fort Stevens, he wrote these comments regarding the letter: "Since the above account of the battle of Fort Stevens has been in print, I have received the following very interesting account of President Lincoln's presence at the battle. The writer of this work was in conversation with the President when General Wright rode up to the Fort, and accompanied the party to the parapet, but left the fort when the wounded began to come to the rear."⁶

The "very interesting account" which followed was from the pen of Major General Horatio G. Wright, the officer in command of the Sixth Corps at the time of its coming to the defense of Washington.⁷

⁵ George Thomas Stevens, *Three Years in the Sixth Corps* (New York, 1870), 377.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 382, footnote.

⁷ Horatio Gouvenour Wright (1820-1899). He was graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1841 and was a captain in the Engineers Corps at the outbreak of the Civil War. Upon the

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Six years had passed since the General had stood with his Commander in Chief at Fort Stevens, but the memory of the incident was relatively fresh in his mind. Wright was but fifty years old at the time, and neither old age nor a long passage of years had befogged his picture of Lincoln facing enemy fire for the first and only time. That picture stood forth clearly as General Wright wrote these recollections of late afternoon hours of July 12 :

The President evinced a remarkable coolness and disregard of danger. Meeting him as I came out of my quarters, I thoughtlessly invited him to see the fight in which we were about to engage, without for a moment supposing he would accept. A moment after I would have given much to have recalled my words, as his life was too important to the nation to be put in jeopardy by a chance shot or the bullet of a sharpshooter. He took his position at my side on the parapet, and all my entreaties failed to move him, although in addition to the stray shots that were passing over, the spot was a favorite mark for sharpshooters.

When the surgeon was shot and after I had cleared the parapet of everyone else, he still maintained his ground till I told him I should have to remove him forcibly. The absurdity of the idea of sending off the President under guard seemed to amuse him, but in consideration of my earnestness in the matter, he agreed to compromise by sitting behind the parapet instead of standing upon it. He could not be made to understand why,

death of General John Sedgwick in battle, Wright succeeded to the command of the Sixth Army Corps in May, 1864, and was commissioned a major general at the time. He became Chief of Engineers in 1879, and retired from the army in 1884.

When he went to the defense of Washington, General Wright was in command of about 12,000 men.

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if I continued exposed, he should not, and my representations that an accident to me was of little importance, while to him it could not be measured, and that it was moreover my duty, failed to make any impression on him.

I could not help thinking that in leaving the parapet, he did so rather in deference to my earnestly expressed wishes, than from any consideration of personal danger, though the danger had been so unmistakably proved by the wounding of the officer alluded to. After he left the parapet he would persist in standing up from time to time, thus exposing nearly one-half of his tall form.⁸

The letter of General Wright may not offer as colorful an account of the skirmishes as that of David T. Bull, but it has its amusing and entertaining moments. The elongated jack-in-the-box President, bobbing up and down in the excitement of battle, should have amused others in the fort, if he did not provide a chuckle for the worried General.

Official army reports of General Wright include no mention of the presence of President Lincoln at Fort Stevens, but the General remembered well the interesting if unimportant role he had played in the life of Abraham Lincoln, for he told of it on at

⁸ Stevens, *Three Years in the Sixth Corps*, 382, footnote.

The letter of General Wright was printed again in the *Washington Times* of June 15, 1900, upon the occasion of the holding of Flag Day services at Fort Stevens.

John Hay, former secretary to President Lincoln, spoke at the services, and although he had used a shorter version of the Wright account in his biography of Abraham Lincoln, he made no mention of the President having been under fire at the fort.

It seems probable that the Wright letter was written in 1870, as this was the year of the publication of the revised edition of Stevens' work.

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least one other occasion. It was at the time of a visit to Fort Stevens, in the company of a friend, William V. Z. Cox. As he stood overlooking the former battlefield, the General thought of a less peaceful day in 1864, when he had worried over the safety of a tall, bearded gentleman from Illinois. He stood silent for a moment, then turned to his companion, and began to recount his recollections of that summer afternoon. Several years later, Mr. Cox wrote this account of the conversation :

A few years ago, in company with the old commander of the Sixth Corps, I stood upon the same parapet. After contemplating the surroundings General Wright said :

"Here on top of this parapet, between this old embrasure and that, this is the place where President Lincoln stood witnessing the fight. There, by his side, a surgeon was wounded by a minie ball.

"I entreated the President not to expose his life to the bullets of the enemy, but he seemed oblivious to his surroundings ; finally, when I found that my entreaties made no impression on him, I said, 'Mr. President, I know you are the commander of the armies of the United States, but I am in command here, and as you are not safe where you are standing, I order you to come down.' Mr. Lincoln looked at me and smiled, and then, more in consideration of my earnestness than from inclination, stepped down and took a position behind the parapet. Even then he would persist in standing up and exposing his tall form." ⁹

⁹ Marcus Benjamin (ed.), *Washington During War Time* (Washington, n.d.), 78-79.

The passage is from the chapter entitled, "Fort Stevens, Where Lincoln Was Under Fire," by William Van Zandt Cox.

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There is interesting likeness in the two recollections of General Wright, although there are minor differences in them. Both include the memory of the President smiling tolerantly over the worries of the perturbed General, and reluctantly taking a place behind the parapet. There is a like picture of Lincoln exposing himself to fire even after a surgeon had been shot at his side. A most marked difference occurs in the account of the recollection of orders given, for while General Wright wrote only the content of his order to Dr. Stevens, he told the exact words of the command to Mr. Cox.

General Wright told an interesting anecdote at two different times, and the consistency of his recollections must be given consideration, for memory has a quaint habit of playing pranks upon men. Memory served the commanding officer in good stead, but he was not the one man to recite the tale, for a like one is found in reminiscences of others who saw action at Fort Stevens.

One of these was a young private in a volunteer regiment from Ohio. The mark of Oberlin College was yet upon him when he arrived in Washington. He was in the thick of battle in July, 1864, and had exciting experiences to remember. The former private, Peter H. Kaiser, had passed from a young to an old man when he sat down to record this reminiscence:

In the midst of the battle, I saw, standing upon the para-

It is probable that General Wright wrote to Dr. Stevens before he recalled his memories for Mr. Cox, as that gentleman did not come to Washington until 1877.

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pet a few rods from the gun to which I was assigned, a tall man wearing a tall stovepipe hat and long coat, who was watching the progress of the fighting with the closest interest, wholly unmindful of the danger in which he stood. Many eyes were turned in his direction, and upon inquiry I learned that the man was President Lincoln.

General Wright in command of the 6th Corps, stood near him with a field glass, viewing the contest, when a bullet wounded a soldier nearby. The General turned at once with the order—"Mr. President, step down from the parapet, you are too conspicuous an object to remain in so exposed a position." Like a good soldier, he obeyed.

This was, I understand, the only battle during the Civil War in which the President was an eyewitness.

This was the first and only time that I saw the Great Emancipator.¹⁰

The account by young Kaiser is not an exact blueprint of that of General Wright, but it reveals that another remembered the incident at Fort Stevens as the General did. The Kaiser rendition of the Wright order has a dash of pepper not found in Wright's own account, but it is not unlike the Cox version of the command. The forty-six-year-old reminiscences

¹⁰ Peter H. Kaiser, "Lincoln at Fort Stevens," in *National Magazine* (Boston, 1894-1914), XXXI (1910), 525-26.

Mr. Archer Shaw, former editorial writer on the staff of the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, told the author that Mr. Kaiser was known to him. The Oberlin graduate became an attorney in Cleveland, Ohio, and was a man whose integrity was respected.

The Kaiser recollections are not presented as accepted historical fact, but in view of the reputation of the Cleveland attorney, they deserve consideration in an analysis of anecdotes about Mr. Lincoln at Fort Stevens.

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of a former soldier may not be sound evidence of the authenticity of the Wright anecdote, but in this case, it should be observed that Peter Kaiser did not use his memories of a President as any claim to distinction. He told a simple anecdote of the President and General Wright, not one of Peter Kaiser and Lincoln.

Kaiser was but one of several Ohioans who saw the President at Fort Stevens, for soldiers from the "Buckeye State" took an important part in the defense of Washington. One of these was a young man who had not been accepted for service with the regular army. He was then chosen to become a member of the cavalry company which served the President as a personal bodyguard, and it was in such capacity that Robert W. McBride saw action on the afternoons of July, 1864. He, too, had memories of Abraham Lincoln and General Wright, but his recollections were not published until after his death. At that time, they were reminiscences of a day sixty-two years past. The Ohio volunteer had become a respected judge in the neighboring state of Indiana, and was known to his friends for his veracity and honesty. When he stated something for a fact, it was accepted as such, and the Judge was respected for his refusal to become a peddler of anecdotes of his associations with famous men. In his recollections of an association with a great man, he left this account of Abraham Lincoln and the attack on Fort Stevens:

Nor does history tell, as the Union light Guard and others present at the time can tell, of that July day when Early made

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his attack upon Fort Stevens, and how Mr. Lincoln, improving that which he said was his first and only opportunity to see a real battle, watched the fighting, standing on the parapet of the fort, exposed not only to the fire of the Confederate skirmishers but of the Confederate sharpshooters who had taken possession of the Blair Mansion and fired from its windows until the shells from the fort passing through and exploding in the house sent them scurrying for better shelter. Mr. Lincoln apparently unmindful of or indifferent to his danger from the enemy's bullets that were sending little spurts and puffs of dust as they thudded into the embankment on which he stood, paid no heed to the remonstrances of those around, and calmly suggested that he was only taking the chance that thousands of others were taking daily at his command.

After an officer standing near the President was stricken, the general officer in immediate command, Major General Horatio Wright of the Sixth Corps, thoroughly alarmed for Mr. Lincoln's safety, sternly admonished him that his life was too valuable to the country to justify his exposure, and notwithstanding that Mr. Lincoln was, as President, his Commander-in-Chief, he was himself in immediate command of that place, and because of his personal responsibility, he ordered him to retire to a position of less danger, which Mr. Lincoln did, smilingly, but with obvious reluctance.¹¹

¹¹ Robert W. McBride, *Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln* (Indianapolis, 1926), 64-65.

Robert W. McBride was born in 1842 at Barnes Post Office, Ohio. He entered the profession of schoolteaching and remained in it until the outbreak of the Civil War. Rejected for service in the regular army, he was chosen to be a member of the Seventh Independent Company of Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, better known as the Union Light Guard. McBride served from 1863 to 1865 in the Cavalry Company which became the personal bodyguard to President Lincoln.

After the end of the war, McBride studied law, and was admitted to the bar in 1867. He was Judge of the Thirty-fifth Judicial District

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The recollections of the Ohio volunteer proved to be a blend of the ingredients in the Wright letter, the Cox account, and the Kaiser anecdote, but was flavored with the personal touch of the writer. The "Buckeye" portrayed the General as a stern commander, whereas Wright had pictured himself as the recipient of a compromise upon the part of the President. The remarks about the utterance of Lincoln in regard to "taking" chances do not appear in any other account of the incidents at Fort Stevens, and some may view them as an unauthentic heroic attributed to the President by McBride. In the absence of conclusive factual evidence upon this point, the utterance cannot be dismissed as allegorical. Although the recollections of the Judge differ from those of Wright upon this last matter, they are enough like those of the General to offer further substantiation of the possible authenticity of his account.

Peter Kaiser and his fellow Ohioan left no doubt of their conviction that General Wright was the man

of Indiana, 1882-1888, and Justice of the Supreme Court of Indiana, 1890-1893. He died in 1926 at Indianapolis.

Although he was noted for his accuracy of fact, the Judge may have erred in his reference to the Blair Mansion as the shelter of Confederate sharpshooters. The Blair Mansion was about 2,500 yards from Fort Stevens, and, although Captain Joseph Abbey reports that he drove sharpshooters from houses 3,000 yards distant, the strongest force of Confederate sharpshooters was lodged in the Rives and Lay houses at the time Lincoln was exposed to their fire. These dwellings were about 1,000 yards distant from the fort, and Major General A. McCook reports that the Blair Mansion was frequently confused with these two houses in reports of the battle.

who ordered the President down, and at least one other soldier implies that he did so. Corporal Blanding did not single the General out as did Kaiser and his fellow Ohioan, but he gave an impression that his superior officer persuaded the President to abandon his precarious position. Corporal Blanding was a member of the Third Massachusetts Infantry and, like Kaiser, was stationed at Fort Stevens. Twenty-five years after he had taken part in the defense of Washington, he wrote a volume about his experiences as a soldier in the Capital. Included in the work was this recollection of President Lincoln at the fort: "Pres. Lincoln never showed to such splendid advantage at any time during the rebellion as he did when he stood on the parapet at Fort Stevens that day, and in plain view of the sharpshooters, the bullets zipping in close proximity to his person, calmly viewing the approach of Early and his forces with a critical eye. A sharpshooter picked off two officers near the President, who at the time was conversing with General Wright. He was induced to finally descend from his dangerous outlook." ¹²

"Such splendid advantage"; Corporal Blanding had not heard a saddened "Father Abraham" at a cemetery in a small Pennsylvania village, a man "with malice toward none." The Blanding recollection is, nonetheless, a good anecdote of a man whom "Jube" Early could not "scare." With the exception of a reference to the shooting of two officers and a

¹² Stephen Blanding, *In the Defenses of Washington or the Sunshine in a Soldier's Life* (Providence, 1889), Appendix, 54.

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failure to identify General Wright as the man who ordered Lincoln down, it is a shorter version of the accounts of Kaiser and Wright. It is possible that it may be like them in reference to General Wright, for as the officer was in conversation with the President at the time, he may have induced him to descend from "his dangerous outlook."

Although three soldiers felt that their commanding officer played an important part in saving the life of their Commander in Chief, there were others who omitted mention of him in their accounts of the happening. They, too, were near by Lincoln at Fort Stevens and in good position to see him and hear him speak. Some were Oberlin men, members of the same volunteer regiment in which Peter H. Kaiser had enlisted. One of the Oberlinites was a theological student in his early thirties, a gunner who perspired but did not curse upon the hot but exciting July days within the fort. He had stood within earshot of the President, and treasured memories of the event. These recollections formed the warp and woof of a good story about Lincoln, a new and different tale that blended realism with the picturesque. Almost forty years after he had fed the big guns at the fort, the Civil War comrades of James Hayes Laird had a reunion in Cleveland, Ohio. The former sergeant was not present upon the occasion, but he sent this interesting letter about a visit to a battleground well known to his former regiment:

I revisited the site of Fort Stevens a few years ago, and stood upon the spot I occupied during the attack. It was close

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by the bomb-proof, which was elevated some eight feet above the gun platform. Upon the elevation stood President Lincoln, Mrs. Lincoln, Secretary Seward and others. Rifle balls were flying freely about, and we felt it a duty to keep below the parapet when we were not occupied. Bedient, who was wont to speak his mind, called out: "President Lincoln, you had better get down, the rebs will shoot you." ¹³

No mention of General Wright was made; only the words of an obscure Ohio private were given, but the jocular order of a common soldier should be kept in mind. In fact, it will be well to notice the impetuous young Bedient and also the presence of Mrs. Lincoln.

Four years after the occasion of the reunion in Cleveland, the former noncommissioned officer, now an elderly minister, went in person to a reunion of his old regiment. Upon that occasion, he recited tales of days at Fort Stevens that had not been included in his letter to his fellow veterans. One of the anecdotes was fashioned into this simple prose sketch of the tired President: "Sunday, the tenth about noon the Black Horse Cavalry escort of the President, dashed up to our postern. Lincoln hastily left the barouche, entered the fort, and passing from gun to gun, looked out upon the field it covered. In his long, yellowish linen coat and unbrushed high hat, he looked like a care worn farmer in time of peril from drouth and famine." ¹⁴

¹³ John C. Cannon (comp.), *Record of Service of Company K, 150th Ohio Volunteer Infantry*, (Cleveland, 1903), 26.

¹⁴ John C. Cannon (comp.), *Memorial 150th Ohio Company K*.

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Although it was the Sabbath Day, Abraham Lincoln had not dressed for the occasion. He was interested more in the defense of the Capital than in his personal appearance. Well might he look careworn, for the war years had exacted their toll; their tragedy lay deep in his somber eyes and the furrows of his face. James H. Laird had looked upon a man of sorrows at Fort Stevens and had remembered him well. He recalled not only the incident but the jocular advice given at the time to the President, and later wrote this story about the "care worn farmer":

Mon. July 11

In connection with the separating walls of the part was a lookout, joined to the wall on its west side and to the parapet on the north or front. A small group of persons stood upon this lookout, which was about ten feet from our gun, and perhaps eight feet above. The central figure was President Lincoln. Near the President was a uniformed man whom we afterward learned was an army surgeon. The party were looking out upon the battlefield. Minie balls were singing about them.

Bedient, hot with excitement, had just come in from the picket line with a bullet-hole in his cap. Scarce knowing what he said he called out: "President Lincoln, you had better come down, the rebels will shoot you."

Some of our boys who brought in prisoners said the captured men told them that Lincoln was seen from the cupola of a house, recognized and fired at.¹⁵

(Cleveland, July 11, 1907), 8. The "yellowish linen coat" worn by Lincoln was like that of his days on the circuit in Illinois. Dust-streaked and dirty, it was faded and dark in appearance.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

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Not one biography of, or work about, Abraham Lincoln includes a reference to this incident.

The little-known reminiscences of eyewitnesses at Fort Stevens are not without flaw, it is true, but careful analysis will reveal the errors of fact. For example, memory may have played a trick upon the Reverend J. H. Laird, when he wrote at one time of Private Bedient speaking his own mind and at another of the young soldier not knowing what he said to President Lincoln. Then, there is the matter of the recognition of Lincoln at a distance of more than one thousand yards. The Confederate sharpshooters had either most unusual eyesight, or powerful glasses; even then they missed their seven-foot target.

Though Laird overlooked the wounding of the army surgeon who stood near the President, such was not the case of John C. Cannon. He, too, had been under fire upon July 11 and 12, and, at a Cleveland reunion of his regiment, he related a history of the two days for his erstwhile fellow soldiers. In writing of his recollections, he said: "President Lincoln was in the fort with Secretary Stanton and others, and exposed himself in quite a hazardous position in his anxiety to see what was going on in the field. His tall form was plainly seen by the enemy sharpshooters,

The account is taken from the personal reminiscences of Orderly Sergeant James Hayes Laird. He was graduated from Oberlin College in 1860 and was granted the degree of Master of Arts by the same institution in 1863. He held a pastorate at Hinsdale, Massachusetts, at the time of his visit to Cleveland. The private who gave advice to a President was John A. Bedient, a soldier in Laird's regiment.

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and a bullet struck the gun by which he was standing, and glancing off wounded Surgeon C. C. V. Crawford in the leg. The President then withdrew to a safer position." ¹⁶

With the exception of a reference to the presence of Secretary Stanton and the wounding of Dr. C. C. V. Crawford, Cannon's reminiscences add little to the story. The account has, however, one unique distinction; it was the first to reveal the identity of the wounded surgeon. The historian of the Ohio regiment places the injury to the doctor as of July 11, and C. C. V. Crawford may prove to be a most interesting and active fellow.

The President was standing near a seventeen-year-old soldier at the time of the wounding of the surgeon. The young soldier had planned to enter Oberlin College, but he was caught up in the mad whirl of war which offered adventure for a spirited lad of high-school years. The young man gave up thoughts of college, donned the Union blue, and entrained for Washington with the Oberlin College contingent. Edgar H. Hinman was a mere stripling as he stood near his Commander in Chief on a July afternoon, but he was a man in his middle fifties as he sat down to write this interesting and tardy anecdote:

There was an interesting little incident on the afternoon of the 12th of July which possibly you may have forgotten and which may be of interest in any little history you get up. President Lincoln visited the fort that afternoon accompanied by Senator Zack Chandler of Michigan. The enemy was firing

¹⁶ Cannon (comp.), *Record of Service of Company K*, 16.

lively from the bushes in front of the fort and it was dangerous for any person to look over the parapet. Chandler hugged close to the parapet, but the President was bound he would look over and see what was going on. Soon a sharpshooter fired at him, and he dodged, in doing so tipped over the pass box on which he was sitting and tumbled down. The ball fired at him struck one of the large guns, glanced back and went through a [surgeon's] soldier's leg on the look-out. Lincoln gathered himself up and laughing said: "That was quite a carom." I was standing back of him at the time and was curious to know what a carom meant, and so I asked one of the boys versed in billiards, and he told me. . . . Some of those standing by thought the President was given to a little too much levity and that the remark was a little too jocose for the occasion, but he did not realize what had happened until after he said it.¹⁷

The chief executive might be portrayed as dodging nimbly out of the path of a leaden ball, and sprawling undignifiedly upon the ground, as the stovepipe hat flew from his head. He could be pictured then as slowly gathering his lanky figure together, collecting each part as he arose, and crinkling the corners of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

The account is taken from a copy of a letter of Edgar H. Hinman, a former private in the Ohio regiment. He was for years a judge of the Probate Court in Elyria. Mr. Archer Shaw told the author that Hinman was so highly respected that the citizens of Elyria, Ohio, almost took his particular office out of politics in order to retain his services upon the bench.

Mr. Shaw informed the author that the word of Judge Hinman was thought to be unimpeachable authority, but, in view of the moss that gathered upon his recollections, his account is offered as an entertaining anecdote, not authentic source material. The many differences in the eyewitness accounts reveal the difficulty of accepting some as authentic and others as mere allegory.

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his mouth for a good Lincolnian sally. Such a portrait of the President is an amusing one, but it is a mere figment of the imagination. The jest about a carom shot may be authentic, for Lincoln played billiards and enjoyed the recreation it affords.

The Hinman account presented facts that make historians justly suspicious of reminiscences, especially those given many years after an event has occurred. Cannon and Hinman were both at Fort Stevens upon the same days in July, but, whereas Cannon saw Surgeon Crawford wounded on July 11, Hinman saw him shot in the leg on July 12. Hinman made no reference to General Wright, but Kaiser and McBride, who were in the fort at the time, heard the officer in command order the President from the parapet. Although a medley of accounts by Ohioans reveals the foregoing differences, only the facts included in those of Cannon and Hinman are in distinct contradiction. Both of these narratives, with their conflicting dates, cannot be accepted as reliable sources, if only for the reason that Dr. Crawford would have been shredded by shot had he received the wounds attributed to him upon two successive summer days in 1864.

Although five Ohio soldiers left interesting accounts of their memories of Lincoln, it is probable that many others left theirs untold. One aged veteran passed away shortly after he told of his memories of Lincoln. He was a twenty-year-old corporal when he saw the President at Fort Stevens; he had reached the age of ninety-two when he told this tale:

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"The longer I've lived," said Colonel William Patton Griffith only a year ago when he had lived to ninety two, "and the more I've thought about the day I saw Lincoln under fire, the more I've wondered why so little has been written about it."

I remarked that most Americans probably had never realized that Lincoln was still the only President who had been under fire in the wartime while in office.

"You're dead right," said Colonel Griffith, "And yet he was under fire at Fort Stevens on two successive days, July 11 and 12, 1864. It was on the first day that I saw him. As you might expect, he was heedless of danger, concerned only about seeing for himself what was happening.

"Lincoln got to the fort ahead of us. He was quiet and grave. He mounted the parapet so he could see better, and I saw him there in full view of the 'Johnnies,' watching them and what went on inside. You can imagine what a target he made with tall form and stovepipe hat.

"General Wright stood on one side of him and Surgeon G. V. C. Crawford of our regiment on the other. Both nearly threw a fit. 'Mr. President,' pleaded the general, 'will you please come down? You're a perfect mark for the sharpshooters.' But Lincoln remained where he was.

"Then we charged and drove the 'Johnnies' back. During the charge a Confederate bullet, probably deflected by the wind, struck down Crawford, who was so close to Lincoln that he could have reached out and touched him. But even then Lincoln stayed right there until our charge had carried through."¹⁸

¹⁸ John E. Bierck, "He Saw Lincoln Under Fire," in *Liberty Magazine* (New York, 1927-), XIV (1937), 7.

Colonel Griffith and David T. Bull seem to have overestimated the force of the Union charge. Confederate officers claimed that it was repulsed easily. The Union Chief of Staff, General H. W. Halleck,

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The mistake in the initials of Dr. Crawford may have been a typographical error, for G. V. C. Crawford is very similar to C. C. V. Crawford, but there are other mistakes in the anecdote which are not overlooked so easily. The colonel dated the injury to the surgeon as July 11, and in doing so he was supported by other soldiers who gave accounts of the incident. If the doctor was wounded on the eleventh, Griffith must have been one of the first members of the Sixth Corps to reach Fort Stevens, for President Lincoln left the fort before the main body of General Wright's troops filed into it. It is possible that Griffith was an early arrival at the fort, but it does not seem possible for Dr. Crawford to have been wounded on the eleventh. Griffith pictured the surgeon as being wounded during a charge of the Union troops on that day. There was an offensive movement by a division of the Sixth Corps about five in the afternoon of July 11, but evidence shows that President Lincoln was in the White House at that hour. A brigade under Colonel Daniel Bidwell made a charge against the Confederate troops late in the afternoon of July 12, and the President was in the fort at the time. It was probably this charge which Griffith referred to, for Brigadier General Frank Wheaton reported an assault by Bidwell shortly after 5 P.M., and added these succinct words, "Severely wounded: Assistant Surgeon Crawford, 102nd Pa.

reported a loss of about 300 men in this charge. Official reports of the battle do not indicate a rout of the Confederates as pictured by Griffith and Bull.

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Volunteers.”¹⁹ The reference to the injury of Crawford on July 11 weakens the whole Griffith narrative, for all other facts stem from this date. The colonel was confused as to the day upon which he had seen Lincoln under fire, but seventy years was a long time to remember an exact date.

There is nothing unusual in Griffith's recollection of the order of General Wright, for other soldiers agree that he spoke to the President in regard to abandoning his position. The unusual fact is the memory of the exact words of the general, seventy years after they were spoken. There is an amazing difference between the words which he attributed to himself and those accredited to him by others.

Memory had played pranks upon Griffith, but there is no doubt that he saw the episode, for he was a corporal in the 102nd Pennsylvania Volunteers who had come to the defense of Washington.

Colonel Griffith erred not only in the memory of fact, but he was mistaken also in his opinion that little had been written about President Lincoln under fire at Fort Stevens. It is true that none of the accounts appeared in a work so widely circulated as the *Liberty Magazine*, but many were in print before the Griffith anecdote came to light.

These came not only from the pens of the fighting men, but from those of civilians. Cabinet members, Senators, ladies and gentlemen of fashion, little-known citizens went out to watch the fighting at

¹⁹ *War of the Rebellion: Official Records*, Ser. I, Vol. XXXVII, Pt. I, p. 275.

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Fort Stevens. Some went upon serious business; others made the trip in the sheer spirit of adventure. Washington citizens were rather calm in the face of danger, and even pepperbox Edwin M. Stanton maintained an unusual air of complacency.

As Secretary of War, Stanton went out to the fortifications, and cabinet members William H. Seward and Gideon Welles were present during hours of battle. Stanton, the small and bearded servant of Mars, was at the fort in official capacity, while Gideon Welles may have been there in the hope of seeing his sparring partner in the cabinet give way to the hysteria which he noted more than once as characteristic of the Secretary of War.

The Committee on the Conduct of the War also had work to do, and "Bluff Ben" Wade of squirrel-rifle fame went out to Fort Stevens, leaving his rifle behind him. Another member of the committee, cantankerous Zachariah Chandler, made his way to the outskirts of the city, perhaps to report upon the battle strategy to his colleagues in the Senate. He may have been interested in the action, but not in a close view of it, for he kept to a sheltered position behind the parapet at all times.

Many gentlemen from Washington, accompanied by ladies, visited the fort on the July afternoons. Mrs. Lincoln drove out with her husband, while Mrs. Wright brought a group of friends to witness the skirmishes. Society ladies dressed in the latest fashions watched the fighting from sheltered positions and cheered the troops on. It was a day of adventure

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for them, a time of a tournament of gallant men pitted against each other. Men shouted encouragement to the troops and the ladies cheered wildly. Dr. Stevens has given this picture of the reaction of the onlookers as the Union troops charged against the Carberry house and took it: "Then the crowd at the fort rent the air with exultant cheers, and as the boys reached the house, the people were wild with excitement, shouting and clapping their hands, leaping and dancing with joy." ²⁰

It is not recorded that he shouted, leaped or danced with joy, but the Register of the Treasury, Lucius E. Chittenden, was one of the crowd of people that watched the fighting on the afternoon of July 12. He had many memories of Lincoln, and he wrote more than one book upon his recollections of the Civil War President and his administrations. One of the volumes included this account of a conversation with a young officer at Fort Stevens:

A young colonel of the artillery, who appeared to be the officer of the day, was in great distress because the President would expose himself, and paid little attention to his warnings. He was satisfied that the Confederates had recognized him, for they were firing at him very hotly, and a soldier near him had fallen with a broken thigh. He asked my advice for he said the President was in great danger.

"What would you do with me in like circumstances?" I asked.

"I would civilly ask you to take a position where you were not exposed."

²⁰ Stevens, *Three Years in the Sixth Corps*, 379.

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"And if I refused to obey."

"I would send a sergeant and a file of men and make you obey."

"Then treat the President as you would me or any civilian."

"I dare not. He is my superior officer; I have taken the oath to obey his orders."

"He has given you no orders. Follow my advice, and you will not regret it."

"I will," he said, "I may as well die for one thing as another. If he were shot, I should hold myself responsible."

He walked to where the President was leaning over the parapet. "Mr. President," he said, "you are standing within range of five hundred rebel rifles. Please come down to a safer place. If you do not, it will be my duty to call a file of men and make you."

"And you would be quite right, my boy!" said the President coming down at once. "You are in command of this fort. I should be the last man to set an example of disobedience."

He was shown to a place where the view was less extended, but where there was less exposure.²¹

²¹ Lucius E. Chittenden, *Recollections of President Lincoln and His Administration* (New York, 1891), 415-16.

Lucius E. Chittenden (1824-1900). He studied law, and was admitted to the bar in 1844. He became a prominent leader of the anti-slavery and Free-Soil forces in Vermont, and upon the formation of the Republican party, entered its ranks. He served as state senator in Vermont from 1856 to 1860, and in 1861 went as Vermont delegate to the Washington Peace Conference.

He stumped the state of Pennsylvania for Abraham Lincoln during the campaign of 1860 and was rewarded with an appointment as Register of the Treasury. He served in this office from 1861 to 1865 and then entered the practice of law.

He was also the author of *Lincoln and the Sleeping Sentinel* (New York, 1891), and the compiler of *Abraham Lincoln's Speeches* (New York, 1895).

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The Chittenden anecdote included ingredients for the possible identification of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., as the person with whom the Register of the Treasury conversed on the afternoon of July 12. The young officer who feared to give orders to his Commander in Chief was a lieutenant colonel. At the time of the attack upon Fort Stevens, Holmes was a brevet lieutenant colonel, and acted as aide-de-camp to General Wright. Chittenden did not identify the officer to whom he gave advice, and it might have been Holmes.

It might have been, but the Chittenden portrait of the officer of the day is not characteristic of Captain Holmes. The noted Justice was a man of action, not of words. He would not have wasted time in idle talk while the President stood in danger of being shot. As a young man, he was a person with strength of character and ingenuity; it is difficult to think of him as a distraught officer rushing to civilians for advice. The terse words "Get down, you fool!" seem to be more in character with the nature of the man of action.

Holmes may have been absent from the Chittenden reminiscences for good reason. President Lincoln knew the officer in command of the fort. He was John N. Frazee, Lieutenant Colonel of the 150th Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Possibly another young fellow from Oberlin College played a part in the little drama at Fort Stevens.

Frazee may have been the unidentified officer who was said by Chittenden to have ordered Lincoln from



CAPTAIN OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, JR.

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the parapet, and the identification of the young lieutenant colonel is one of several points in the Chittenden anecdote which are deserving of study. The reminiscence must be studied in comparison with the accounts of other men who were at Fort Stevens. It is possible that two men gave a like order to the President, but did General Wright err in his recollection of his words to Abraham Lincoln? Laird, McBride, Cannon, Griffith, and Hinman saw Lincoln under fire, but each man told a different story about the incident. They, too, like Chittenden, spoke as eyewitnesses at Fort Stevens.

Chittenden attributed to a young officer the words that ordered the President from his position of danger, while others at the fort said that General Wright ordered Lincoln down. Several men spoke of seeing the General at the side of the President at the time that Dr. Crawford was struck down. They say that it was at that moment that Wright ordered the President down. Strangely, a young officer of the day ordered him down at the same moment. It may be that the lieutenant colonel ordered the President down, but it is peculiar that an officer, who feared the wrath of his Commander in Chief, ventured that of another superior officer by going to the parapet and ordering Lincoln down. It is possible that Chittenden made use of an unidentified officer as a mouthpiece; it may be that he did not, but the acceptance or rejection of his anecdote must hinge upon the possible validity of the Wright account.

Another member of the President's official family

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visited the fort upon the same day, saw Abraham Lincoln under fire, and almost ignored the fact. This is odd, for Gideon Welles was one of the noted diarists of his day. Items of unusual interest found their way at once into his little book. The entries were not accurate at all times, for they were spiced frequently with a dash of personal prejudice; but they make interesting reading today, and furnish a colorful day-by-day account of troubled years for Lincoln. "Gossipy Gideon," on his return from Fort Stevens, made this entry in his diary:

Rode out this P.M. to Fort Stevens. Went up to the summit of the road on the right of the fort. There were many collected. Looking out over the valley below, where the continual popping of the pickets was still going on, though less brisk than yesterday, I saw a line of men lying close near the bottom of the valley. Senator Wade came up beside me. Our views corresponded that the Rebels were few in front, and that our men greatly exceeded them in numbers. We went together into the fort, where we found the President, who was sitting in the shade, with his back against the parapet towards the enemy.

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One man had been shot in the fort a few minutes before we entered.²²

Welles had gone out to the fort on the evening of July 11, but if he saw Lincoln under fire at that time, he made no record of having done so. He did not record the hour of his arrival on the twelfth, but

²² Entry of July 12, 1864, Diary of Gideon Welles, MS. (in Library of Congress).

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noted that he entered the fort shortly after a man had been shot down. The man might have been Dr. Crawford. Welles did not say; he recorded only the fact that the President had left the parapet when he arrived. General Wright told of the President descending from the parapet, seating himself on a box, and jumping up frequently to watch the skirmishing. One man pictured him standing erect on the parapet, and craning over to get a better view of the action, while another saw him tumble in most undignified manner from his box seat, as he nimbly dodged a Confederate bullet. Welles saw none of this.

Welles and Chittenden were well-known figures of the Civil War era. In distinct contrast to these prominent officials was an almost unknown Negress, one of the many visitors to the fort. She lived near by and had come over to help the defenders in their fight against the enemy. In later years she liked to tell the tale of the part she played in the skirmishes near Washington. Mention of this woman is given by one who visited the fort some thirty odd years ago. He writes:

My recollection of Elizabeth Thomas is that of an aged negress, who spent much of her time on the front porch of, as I remember it, a small wooden house.

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As to the story which Elizabeth Thomas told, the only time when I heard her speaking she described by pointing with a crooked cane the line where the Federal entrenchments were

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and the spot where Lincoln stood under fire. . . . In regard to any statement which she made to the president I have no recollection. . . .²³

Aunt Elizabeth was able to give a good account of the battle; her part in it was remembered well by the defenders of the fort, and it was spoken of by an outstanding Washington citizen, William Van Zandt Cox. It was he who first introduced "Aunt Betty" (called "Aunt Betsy" by some writers) to the American people in his pamphlet, *The Defenses of Washington*. Although he made brief reference to her in the body of his work, he told in a footnote the story of her meeting with President Lincoln.²⁴ He could not tell of the contact with the President, for it seems that "Aunt Betty" withheld this tale from

²³ Nehemiah O. Whitford to author, June 23, 1943.

Mr. Whitford is the grandson of Nehemiah G. Ordway, chairman of the New Hampshire Republican State Committee at the time of the Lincoln campaign in 1860. Mr. Ordway was Sergeant-at-Arms of the United States House of Representatives during the Lincoln administration and had charge of the arrangements for the official party which accompanied the Lincoln funeral cortege from Washington to Springfield.

²⁴ William Van Zandt Cox, *The Defenses of Washington: General Early's Advance on the Capital and the Battle of Fort Stevens* (Washington, 1907), 4, footnote.

The footnote in the Cox pamphlet contained this account of a meeting of "Aunt Betty" and President Lincoln: "Aunt Betty says: ' . . . In the evening I was sitting under the sycamore tree—my only house—with what furniture I had left around me. I was crying, as was my six months' old child, which I had in my arms, when a tall slender man dressed in black, came up and said to me: "It is hard, but you shall reap a great reward." It was President Lincoln, and had he lived I know the claim for my losses would have been paid.' "

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him. She left no memoirs, but was an interesting speaker and was called on to address several meetings of the Grand Army of the Republic. It was at these meetings that she told this anecdote, a tale that has been retold by one who knew her as an old woman: "While the battle was raging and bullets were whizzing everywhere, Mrs. Thomas was busy as a bee doing her duties in helping the defenders of the fort. Suddenly she looked out of the basement window and saw Lincoln standing upon the bank of the newly constructed trenches. Forgetting everything, she excitedly yelled to those near him, 'My God, make that fool get off that hill and come in here.' " ²⁵

"Aunt Betty" remembered that the President only smiled when she called him a fool. It is possible that he did so; he had grown accustomed to being termed a fool. More than one Northern newspaper had called him a "simple Susan," and a Congressman had told him once that fiery little Secretary Stanton had called his chief a "damn fool" for meddling in the business of the War Department. Lincoln had replied with good grace that he guessed it must be so, for Stanton was correct most of the time. He had gone then to see Stanton, and his orders had been carried out.

Although her story bore striking resemblance to one recounted by Mr. Justice Holmes, there is no evidence to show that Elizabeth Thomas had heard the Holmes anecdote. The tales do not discredit each other; the two can live side by side, but one thing

²⁵ John E. Washington, *They Knew Lincoln* (New York, 1942), 163-64.

must be borne in mind regarding the recollections of "Aunt Betty." William Van Zandt Cox told one of her anecdotes in his pamphlet, and in that same work he related the tale of General Wright and Abraham Lincoln almost exactly as he had done in the chapter in the pamphlet *Washington During War Time*. The story of "Aunt Betty" and the "fool" did not appear in the Cox pamphlet, and such fact must be considered in an analysis of the Thomas anecdote.

It is a known fact that ten persons may write about an incident which they saw occur but five hours before and that they may pen ten different accounts of the affair. The reminiscences of those persons who recalled events twenty-five years and more after they occurred have produced many varied reports of President Lincoln at Fort Stevens, and this despite the fact that each person was an eyewitness to the happenings. No definite conclusions may be drawn from a conglomeration of reminiscences that are at variance with each other.

It is said that General Wright pleaded with the President to come down, and it is told that he ordered him down. A young colonel is said to have ordered him down in language unbecoming to be addressed to a President, and a private soldier is credited with having advised Mr. Lincoln to get down. "Aunt Betty" Thomas is said to have called the President "a fool" only to see him smile at her thoughtless and excited expression of her anxiety for his safety. As neither Mr. Justice Holmes nor Elizabeth Thomas gave the date of the day on which they termed the

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President "a fool," it is possible that Abraham Lincoln was accused of being foolhardy on two different days.

In the maze of memories, one or two facts seem to be agreed on by the authors of the anecdotes. It seems that President Lincoln stood under fire on the parapet at Fort Stevens, and that a soldier was shot down near him.

In no one of the anecdotes is there conclusive evidence that would permit of accrediting any one person with the words that made President Lincoln come down from his precarious place, but, as more than one eyewitness attributes the words to General Wright, his anecdote of the incident deserves serious consideration. Many portions of these tales may be true, but the account of the general in command has a substantiation of evidence that is lacking in other anecdotes of the incident.

Those who had stood amid the smoke of battle had left the stuffs from which the saga of a President under fire was to be fashioned.

III WHEN THE SMOKE OF BATTLE CLEARED

NOT ONLY did men who saw Lincoln under fire offer material for the biographers to use, but contemporaries of the President left accounts for others to use. These were men who knew Abraham Lincoln well, men who had been with him in the days when he was a rising Illinois politician. They had not visited Fort Stevens, but they had been in Washington City at the time and had heard the reports. Their accounts of the incident differed as much as those of the men who had watched the skirmishes; and this was not unusual, for some of these men set down their records at once, others wrote their stories a few years after the battle, and some did not make their reminiscences public until many years after they had heard of the incidents of July 11 and 12, 1864.

One of the more prominent figures among these contemporaries of Lincoln was Orville H. Browning,¹ friend and associate at the bar with the Spring-

¹ Orville Hickman Browning (1806-1881). He was born in Harrison County, Kentucky. Browning studied law, and was admitted to the bar in 1830. He was state senator of Illinois from 1836 to 1838 and

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field lawyer in Illinois days and United States Senator from Illinois during the Lincoln administration. The Honorable Mr. Browning was one of those meticulous fellows who are a delight to historians and research workers, for, like Gideon Welles, he kept a copious and detailed diary of events in his life. The Browning diary entries may have been less colorful than those in the Welles diary, but they were no less complete. The Senator saw Lincoln frequently in Washington City, and he made record of the meetings in his book. He made no mention of seeing the President on the exciting July days, but on July 12, 1864, he jotted down this entry: "Tuesday July 12 The City in a State of siege. The rebels are in front of Fort Stephens out 7th Street— Some skirmishing going on all day—the sound of guns occasionally heard. The telegraph wires are cut and 7 or 8 miles of the Rail Road torn up not far out of the City. The rebel force is variously estimated at from 20 to 50,000." ²

Senator Browning erred in his belief that the Capital was in a state of siege, for General Early had

state representative from 1843 to 1845. He drafted the conservative platform of the Illinois Republican party in 1856. Edward Bates was the first choice of Browning at the National Republican Convention of 1860, and Abraham Lincoln was the second choice. Browning was United States Senator from Illinois, 1861-1865, and Secretary of the Interior in the cabinet of Andrew Johnson, 1866-1869. Browning was looked upon by many men as the United States Senate spokesman for Lincoln's Border State policy.

² Theodore Calvin Pease and James G. Randall (eds.), *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning* (Springfield, Illinois, 1925), I, 675.

given up hope of taking the city on that morning. It was the "siege," the sound of guns, and the damage done by the Southern army that seemed to have interested the Senator; he made no mention of hearing that Lincoln had been exposed to fire. When he met the President on July 15, they talked of the march on Washington, and Browning wrote this brief record of the meeting: "Met the President between the War Department & White House— Said he was in the dumps—that the rebels who had besieged us were all escaped." ³

It seems that the President did not mention his having been on the scene to Browning, and, if he did, the Senator did not think the matter important enough to record in his diary.

Welles and Browning were not the only keepers of diaries in Washington at the time; there was another, a young fellow who came in daily contact with the President. It was the gay and dashing John Hay, secretary to Lincoln. Four years of close association had made fast friends of the President and Hay. The two men went to the theater together; together they laughed over a good joke, and the older man was the beloved "Tycoon" to the younger one. John Hay kept a most interesting diary, spicing it frequently with the wit that was so characteristic of him. The secretary did not accompany the President to Fort Stevens on July 11, but he was told of the fighting by Lincoln. The "Tycoon" told him a good tale, and Hay may have smiled as he jotted down this entry: "July 11,

³ *Ibid.*, 676.

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1864 At three o'clock P.M. the President came in bringing the news that the enemy's advance was at Fort Stevens on the 7th Street road. He was in the Fort when it was first attacked; standing upon the parapet. A soldier roughly ordered him to get down or he would have his head knocked off. . . ." ⁴

John Hay liked a good tale spiced with a dash of humor, and Abraham Lincoln was the man to tell one well. The two men must have chuckled over the idea of a soldier ordering down his Commander in Chief, and in gruff tones no less. "A soldier roughly ordered him . . . down"; shades of Private John A. Bedient. But were the words "President Lincoln, you had better get down, the rebs will shoot you" given as an order, and were they spoken roughly? Did Abraham Lincoln tell his secretary of John A. Bedient, impulsive young fellow from Oberlin, or did he speak of another private in the ranks? Had the Reverend Dr. J. H. Laird forgotten the exact words spoken by Bedient, or had Lincoln spoken of the gruff order, "Get down, you fool!" The diary entry of July 11 points no finger at Holmes, and although Hay spoke with Captain Holmes on July 13, he recorded no word of his having ordered the President down.

Hay offered the possibility that Captain Holmes was in the fort at the time President Lincoln was ordered down, for on July 11, 1864, he wrote, "Gillmore arrived & reported. Wright & staff also

⁴ Tyler Dennett (ed.), *Lincoln and the Civil War: In the Diaries and Letters of John Hay* (New York, 1939), 208.

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came in.”⁵ The secretary did not tell at what place General Wright and staff had arrived, and he may have referred to the arrival in Washington City. The official record of the itinerary shows that a division of the Sixth Corps arrived at the wharf at Washington at noon on July 11. Dr. George Thomas Stevens, historian of the Sixth Corps, wrote of the President meeting the troops at the wharf and left this picture of the Commander in Chief and his men: “President Lincoln stood upon the wharf chatting familiarly with the veterans, and now and then, as if in compliment to them, biting a piece of hard tack which he held in his hand.”⁶

The President had met with General Wright at the wharf, and had gone from there to Fort Stevens. The exact time of the arrival of General Wright at the fort is not known, but in an official report Major General A. D. McCook wrote this informative sentence: “About 3 P.M. Maj. Gen. H. G. Wright, U. S. Volunteers, commanding the Sixth Corps, reported to me at Fort Stevens, informing me that the advance of his corps would be up in a short time.”⁷

General McCook does not say that General Wright reported in person, but it is possible that the general and staff arrived about three o'clock on the afternoon of July 11. If this be so, Captain Holmes could not have been roughly ordering down the Pres-

⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁶ Stevens, *Three Years in the Sixth Corps*, 375.

⁷ *War of the Rebellion: Official Records*, Ser. 1, Vol. XXXVII, Pt. 1, 237.

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ident at the same hour in which Lincoln was telling a good anecdote to his young secretary. As official reports do not record the hour of the arrival of Captain Holmes at Fort Stevens, there is slight possibility that the President told Hay about him. Very slight possibility, for Abraham Lincoln spoke of being ordered down by a soldier. Is it possible that the Commander in Chief was mistaken in the rank of the soldier, and mistook a captain for a soldier? John Hay did not say.

The day after he had been ordered down, the President visited the fort again and was again under fire. Hay did not write that Lincoln told him of the events of the day; he merely made this notation in his diary on July 12, 1864: "The President again made a tour of the fortifications; was again under fire at Ft. Stevens; a man was shot at his side."⁸

Had John Hay written, "a surgeon was shot at his side," he might have unraveled some of the tangled threads of the episode. He might have disclosed the day on which Surgeon Crawford was wounded, and, in turn, the one on which General Wright ordered his Commander in Chief from the parapet. Several of the eyewitnesses to the incident wrote of Dr. Crawford's being near enough to Lincoln to touch him, and Hay recorded that a man was shot down at his side. That man might have been the surgeon, but, as the secretary to the President did not identify him by name or rank, no definite conclusion may be drawn that he was Surgeon Crawford. Secretary Welles

⁸ Dennett (ed.), *Lincoln and the Civil War*, 209.

wrote of a man having been shot shortly before he saw Lincoln seated behind the parapet, but, like Hay, he did not identify the wounded man. It is known only that the Confederate marksmen were aiming close to President Lincoln and giving him a "warm" time on the afternoon of July 12.

The following morning Hay and Robert Todd Lincoln, eldest son of the President, made a visit to the headquarters of General Wright. They walked through the encampment, escorted by a young officer, and later in the day, Hay made this apparently unimportant entry in his diary: "July 13, 1864— At Crystal Springs we met Capt. O. W. Holmes, Wright's A. D. C. He joined us, and we proceeded through the encampment. . . ." ⁹

Here was record of a meeting of three young men who were almost of an age. John Hay was but six years out of Brown University, and young Holmes and Robert Todd Lincoln were Harvard '61 and Harvard '64 respectively. The son of the President and Hay would have appreciated the anecdote that Holmes had to tell, for Hay had thought the tale of Abraham Lincoln and a soldier interesting enough to enter in his diary. Evidently Captain Holmes withheld his part in the story, for John Hay made record only of the walk and talk with him. Embarrassment did not keep him silent, for young Holmes was not the man to be ashamed of his words or actions; he was a man of courage, unafraid of the criticism of other men. John Hay and Robert Todd Lin-

⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

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coln were relative strangers to Captain Holmes, and it is probable that he was not interested in telling his colorful anecdote to men not familiar to him.

The Holmes anecdote might have added color to the Hay diary, but, even without that tale, it is valuable source material. Its contents are not the reminiscences of an old man; Hay made the entries as the incidents occurred. It does seem probable that a soldier roughly ordered President Lincoln down on July 11. Although there is no reference to any order or plea of General Wright, there is no conclusive evidence from Hay that will not permit acceptance of the account given by the general. It does seem that the Hay diary, written during Civil War days, should be accepted as more authentic than the recollections of the most honest and highly respected men, but their reminiscences need not be discounted because of such fact. There are two flaws in the Hay account of July days at Fort Stevens: it fails to identify the soldier who ordered his superior officer down, and it does not disclose the name of the man who was shot at the side of the President. Otherwise, it is one of the better accounts of Lincoln under fire, for it offers definite proof that the President was ordered down by one of his men and that he thought it a good enough joke to tell on himself.

Another report came from a man who had had six months of daily contact with the President. Artist Francis B. Carpenter was at work on his noted painting of the cabinet discussion of the Emancipation Proclamation when Lincoln rode out to see his men

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at war. Carpenter remembered the rumbling of the cannon, tense days in Washington, and the visits of the President to the fort; he had some memories that were not recalled by other associates of Lincoln. Two years after he had spent a brief but memorable period in the White House, he wrote an account of the months in the company of the President and his family. His volume included this account of Lincoln and the First Lady at the scene of battle: "At the White House the cannonading at Fort Stevens was distinctly heard throughout the day. During Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday the President visited the forts and outworks, part of the time accompanied by Mrs. Lincoln. While at Fort Stevens on Monday, both were imprudently exposed—rifle-balls coming in several instances, alarmingly near."¹⁰

David Bull had seen "Old Abe" and his wife at the fort, Dr. George Thomas Stevens had chatted with Mrs. Lincoln on July 12, and the Reverend James Laird had hinted that she had been under fire, but Carpenter was the first man to state definitely that Mary Todd Lincoln had faced enemy

¹⁰ F. B. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln: The Story of a Picture* (New York, 1867), 301.

Francis Bicknell Carpenter was born in Homer, New York, in 1830. He studied art for five months, and, as a young man, set up his art studio. A full-length portrait of President Millard Fillmore established him as a recognized artist. He later painted portraits of many distinguished statesmen, divines, and leading men of his day. His most noted painting was the picture of President Lincoln and his cabinet at the time of the discussion of the Emancipation Proclamation. According to a statement of Lincoln, Carpenter was "turned loose in the White House" from February to July of 1864.

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fire with her husband. One may wonder if she heard "Mr. Lincoln" ordered down in rude manner and if she resented the "impudence" of one of his men. Carpenter did not write of her reaction to the "insolence" of the Confederate marksmen in spattering the ground near her with bullets, but he did record her conversation with Secretary Stanton when the two met a few days after the attack on Fort Stevens. He gave the following account of that meeting: "In the course of the conversation the Secretary said, playfully, 'Mrs. Lincoln, I intend to have a full-length portrait of you painted, standing on the ramparts of Fort Stevens overlooking the fight!'

" 'That is very well,' returned Mrs. Lincoln very promptly; 'and I can assure you of one thing, Mr. Secretary, if I had had a few ladies with me the Rebels would not have been permitted to get away as they did!' " ¹¹

This was characteristic of the White House hostess, who spiced her sentences, even as she did her food. Mary Lincoln disliked the irascible and eccentric Secretary of War, and her retort to him may have been spoken more in anger than in jest. "A few more ladies" at Fort Stevens, and President Lincoln might not have been "in the dumps" when Browning met him.

Carpenter wrote an account that differed from those of other men, although these same men had seen the President and his lady at the fort. He referred not only to Mary Lincoln having been under fire, but

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 301-302.

recorded a Sunday visit by the President to the fort, a fact substantiated in the account of the Reverend James Laird.

Carpenter did not reveal the source of his information; it might have been a conversation with the President or Mrs. Lincoln, or both. He might have talked with John Hay, but as the secretary to the President made no reference to Mrs. Lincoln's presence nor to a Sunday visit to Fort Stevens, it is probable that he was not the source of the Carpenter anecdotes.

Carpenter became a friend of Lincoln during the few months of close association; four years as secretary to the President had drawn Hay close to him, and years of traveling the circuit in Illinois had made fast friends of Browning and the erstwhile Springfield attorney. But not one of these men was closer to him than his former colleague at the bar, Isaac N. Arnold. As Congressman from Illinois, Arnold saw Lincoln frequently in Washington, and it might be expected that he would have written an interesting account of the activities of his friend at Fort Stevens.

But two years after President Lincoln had visited Fort Stevens, Arnold wrote a biography of his friend which was one of the better and more readable of the time. It included no mention of the President at Fort Stevens; it contained only the fact that General Wright had repelled the attack on Washington. Many years later, the Illinois Congressman revised and condensed his life of Abraham Lincoln, and it contained this brief reference to the skirmishes on

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the outskirts of Washington: "Lincoln, from Fort Stevens, witnessed the repulse of Early's troops, and this was the last attempt of the rebels to capture the capital." ¹²

There was no mention of the President having been under fire; only reference to the fact that he had seen the repulse of the Confederate army. Close friend of Lincoln that Arnold was, he does not seem to have heard any tales of the "battle" of Washington from the President. He may have heard the anecdote from the lips of his friend, but may have found no room for colorful tales in a work that tried to comprehend the many incidents in the life of his subject. It seems more probable, however, that he was not as fortunate as John Hay, and did not hear the story from the President.

Isaac N. Arnold may have stood forth in the Congress as one of few friends of the President, but among the gentlemen of the press Abraham Lincoln had several good friends. One of the most intimate of these was the able correspondent, Noah Brooks. "Castine" Brooks, as he was known to many of his colleagues, had a nose for entertaining news, and

¹² Isaac N. Arnold, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago, 1885), 376.

Arnold was born in Hartwick, New York, in 1815. He taught school, and then turned to the study of law, being admitted to the bar in 1835. He was member of the Illinois General Assembly, 1842-1844, and 1856-1858; Representative to Congress from Illinois, 1861-1865; and Auditor of the Treasury, United States Post Office Department, 1865-1866.

Arnold was also the author of *The History of Abraham Lincoln and the Overthrow of Slavery* (Chicago, 1866),

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his pen turned out many of the interesting newspaper accounts of the Civil War era. His style abounded in color, and, with the materials at hand, he could have written an exciting story of the President under fire. Correspondent Brooks did not write that tale. It may be that he was not at Fort Stevens, for it seems unlikely that Brooks would have overlooked a good human-interest anecdote for his Pacific Coast newspaper. Brooks was in good position to pen an excellent account, for he was close to Lincoln, so close that the President had notified him that he was to become secretary to Lincoln when John G. Nicolay went to Paris as United States Consul.

From his close association with the President, Noah Brooks fashioned a biography of his friend and a history of Washington City in the days of Abraham Lincoln. In neither of these volumes did he make more than brief reference to incidents at Fort Stevens. It was not the usually colorful pen of "Castine" Brooks which wrote these few words about his good friend: "He went out to Fort Stevens during the skirmish in front of the fortifications on July 12, and repeatedly exposed himself in the coolest manner to the fire of the rebel sharpshooters." ¹³

¹³ Noah Brooks, *Washington in Lincoln's Time* (New York, 1896), 187.

Noah Brooks was born in Castine, Maine, in 1830. He was a "Free State" newspaperman in the days of "Bleeding Kansas," and went from Kansas to California, where he established a newspaper.

He sold out in 1862 and went to Washington as a correspondent for the *Sacramento Union*. It was at the time that he came to Washington that he resumed a friendship with Lincoln which had been formed

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The sentence was not as uninteresting as that of Arnold, but it was not characteristic of one of the most brilliant newspapermen of his day, who often conjured up magic with words. Although Brooks told many excellent anecdotes about Lincoln and heard many a good tale from the President, he does not seem to have heard the account of Abraham Lincoln and the Confederate sharpshooters as John Hay heard it.

Abraham Lincoln may be said to have had few intimate friends, but there were many men who came in almost daily contact with him. One of these men was the manager of the telegraph office in the War Department, David Homer Bates. He had many memories of Lincoln, and when he gathered them together in book form he gave space to a short chapter on Lincoln at Fort Stevens in which he included the following tale:

There was one remarkable skirmish, witnessed by Lincoln, whose summer residence was only four miles from Fort Stevens, in a cottage at the Soldiers' Home. Lincoln visited the

at the time of the noted debates with Stephen A. Douglas. After he came to the Capital, Brooks became a frequent caller at the White House.

In 1866 he returned to California to become editor of the *Alta California*, a position he held until 1871. He was member of the editorial staff of the *New York Tribune*, 1871-1876; member of the editorial staff of the *New York Times*, 1876-1884; and editor of the *Newark, New Jersey, Daily Advertiser*, 1884-1892.

Brooks died in California on August 16, 1903. It was said of him that his newspaper writing never again had the brilliance it had attained before the death of his friend Lincoln.

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fortifications on Monday and Tuesday, and on both occasions was in great danger, one of our men having been killed within a few feet of where the President stood. His tall form must have been a conspicuous target for the enemy sharpshooters, and it was a matter of remark at the time that he did not seem to realize the serious risk he incurred in going to the front of our line, while skirmishing was in progress. It is of historical importance to note that this was the first time (and up to the present the only time) when a President of the United States, although the commander-in-chief of the army and navy had been exposed to enemy fire.¹⁴

Bates added little new material to the narrative except to emphasize that Lincoln was the only President of the United States to face the fire of an enemy and to reveal the intense interest which the President evinced in operations at Fort Stevens. After he had watched the fighting on July 11, the President went to the War Department, where he conversed with four of the operators in the telegraph office. One of the quartet, Albert Brown Chandler, made a written record of the meeting, which his fellow telegrapher, Bates, included in the following account:

While Lincoln witnessed the spirited skirmish with Early's troops in front of Fort Stevens on July 11, he carefully observed the whole situation of affairs and upon his return to the city he came direct to the War Department and gave us a pretty full account, which has been recorded by my comrade Chandler, as follows:

"I have in my possession the diagram which Lincoln made

¹⁴ David Homer Bates, *Lincoln in the Telegraph Office* (New York, 1907), 251-52.

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in the telegraph office immediately after his return from his tour of the fortifications to the north and west of the city. This diagram showed the relative positions of the two bodies of troops and where the skirmish took place, all of which he explained to Major Eckert, Tinker, Bates, and myself, who were, of course, extremely interested in his picturesque account.”¹⁵

The President had been more than an interested spectator on the afternoon of July 11; he had been a most careful observer of the action. He had not toured the fortifications for the purpose of a visit to the defenses of Washington, but had noted carefully the position of the troops and the exact spot on which the skirmishing took place and later had drawn a good diagram of the battlefield. At the time of his visit of July 12, he was well acquainted with the defenses and with the position of the Confederate force.

When John G. Nicolay and Hay began work on their monumental life of Lincoln, or, as some term it, their complete history of the Civil War, there was adequate material for an excellent story about President Lincoln at Fort Stevens. When the lengthy biography made its appearance, it contained a rather complete account of the “attack” on Washington, including this description of the President at Fort Stevens:

When Rodes division¹⁶ arrived on the afternoon of the 11th,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 252-53.

¹⁶ Rhodes's division was the one ordered by General Early to make the first test of the defenses of Washington.

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he Lincoln saw the first shots exchanged in front of Fort Stevens, and stood in the fort, his tall figure making him a conspicuous mark, until ordered to withdraw, and on the 12th, when Bidwell's brigade marched in perfect order, out of the works to drive the enemy from the Rives house, the President again stood, apparently unconscious of the danger, watching, with that grave and passive countenance, the progress of the fight amid the whizzing bullets of the sharpshooters, until an officer fell mortally wounded within three feet of him, and General Wright peremptorily represented to him the needless risk he was running.¹⁷

The diary of John Hay made no mention of the presence of General Wright at Fort Stevens, but Nicolay and Hay wrote that it was the general who ordered down his Commander in Chief on July 12. It would be mere conjecture to give reason for the use of the Wright account by Nicolay and Hay. They may have heard the Wright tale from others, and they may have read the General's letter in the volume by Dr. Stevens, but there is no evidence that they did either. Although the use of the Wright recollections added nothing new to the narrative, Nicolay and Hay did present one or two new details. They identified as an army officer the man who was shot, a thing that diarist Hay had not done. Others had recalled seeing a surgeon wounded at the side of the President, and at least one man had seen two officers fall within a few feet of their Commander in

¹⁷ John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (New York, 1890), IX, 172-73.

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Chief; Nicolay and Hay were the first authors to write of an officer having been mortally wounded within striking distance of the President. Surgeon Crawford had fallen at the side of the President, unidentified officers had been struck down at his feet: Death was walking hand in hand with the careworn man.

Last among the contemporaries who wrote of Lincoln in "battle" is one who may be said not to belong. His tale is difficult to place, for he did not record the time of his departure from the parapet, and it is possible that he witnessed the incident of which he wrote in his recollections of years with the Sixth Corps.

Unlike Browning and others, Dr. George T. Stevens was not a close friend of Abraham Lincoln; he was merely an army surgeon who had visited with the President and his wife at Fort Stevens. The doctor accompanied the President to the parapet, but he wrote that he left the fort as soon as the wounded began coming to the rear. It may be more the contemporary of Lincoln than the eyewitness at the fort who recorded the following account: "While the battle was in progress, President Lincoln stood on the parapet of the fort watching with eager interest the scene before him. Bullets came whistling around, and one severely wounded a surgeon who stood within three feet of the President. Mrs. Lincoln entreated him to leave the fort, but he refused; he however, accepted the advice of General Wright to

descend from the parapet and watch the battle from a less exposed position.”¹⁸

Dr. Stevens' account of Mrs. Lincoln's entreating her husband to leave the fort was new to the narrative of President Lincoln under fire, and added color to the "saga." He wrote his account but six years after he had been at Fort Stevens, and he recalled that a surgeon had been wounded on the afternoon of July 12 within three feet of the President, the exact spot on which the unidentified officer had been mortally wounded. As George T. Stevens was surgeon and historian of the Sixth Corps, his date of the wounding of a fellow surgeon deserves consideration.

The recollections of Dr. Stevens are known but slightly to the American people, but it was accounts such as his that furnished materials for a narrative of Abraham Lincoln at Fort Stevens. These tales of eyewitnesses at Fort Stevens did not die with the men who recounted them; they lived on from generation to generation. Some authors brushed lightly over the anecdotes as they passed on to topics of more import, but others accorded them a respectful place in *Lincolniana*.

¹⁸ Stevens, *Three Years in the Sixth Corps*, 381.

IV

FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

MOST OF the early biographies of Abraham Lincoln include no mention of the President having been under fire, and one searches in vain for a reference to the incident in the works of such early biographers as J. G. Holland, Henry Raymond, Isaac N. Arnold, and William H. Herndon. These men may be said to have pioneered in the field of Lincolniana, but the research workers who were to unleash the flood of works on Lincoln had not entered the picture.

Men like Arnold and Herndon wrote of their friend Lincoln, and the latter tried to do pioneer research on the life of his partner at law. Unfortunately he did not separate the wheat from the chaff, and many of his statements were inaccurate. Nonetheless, Herndon has left many debtors in his train, for few lives of Lincoln have been written without recourse to the work of a man who knew the Springfield lawyer so well.

The two secretary-biographers of Mr. Lincoln wrote what may be termed as the first attempt to

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give a comprehensive life of Lincoln, but their work was censored and cannot be called a historically accurate portrait. It remained for Ida M. Tarbell, a lady with a gift for digging up little-known material, to become the first writer to set out in search of the real Lincoln. She did not find him, but others have taken up the search where Miss Tarbell left off. The quest for further knowledge of him has unloosed a veritable flood of books; works have come from the hands of ministers, lawyers, newspapermen, doctors, historians, and writers of popular tales.

One of the first of the more scholarly biographies of Lincoln came from the pen of the able author John T. Morse, Jr. The work was mainly a study of Lincoln and the Civil War and was so crammed with reports of events that it gave but brief mention of the President at the battle scene. Morse saw fit to write only these few words: "There was a brisk artillery firing, and Mr. Lincoln, who had driven out to the scene of action, actually came under fire; an officer was struck down within a few feet of him."¹

As editor of a series of works on American statesmen, Morse was interested in the scholarly reader; he did not write for popular consumption as did the prolific author Charles Carleton Coffin. Coffin's books were popular with both young and old. He might have been expected to utilize a story of Abraham Lincoln and the "Johnnies," but he wrote only this brief description of the events of July 12, 1864: "The Union troops were not there to stand upon the

¹ John T. Morse, Jr., *Abraham Lincoln* (Boston, 1893), II, 282-83.

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defensive; General Wright of the Sixth Corps, in command, determined to advance. The cannon of Fort Stevens opened fire. Upon its ramparts stood President Lincoln." ²

Although biographers Morse and Coffin had seen fit to use accounts of Lincoln at Fort Stevens, the first of the trained historians to write of the incidents at the fort was Dr. Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer. He penned a brief account, compressing many facts into a limited space. Oberholtzer found place only for this terse description of the march of the Southerners on Washington: "Maryland and Pennsylvania towns were compelled to pay him [Early] ransom money under penalty of pillage, crops were stolen and buildings burned, and he had almost unimpeded passage up to the gates of Washington, where from a fort, President Lincoln in person, observed the skirmish which led him to think better of his enterprise." ³

Once unloosed, the flood of Lincolniana swept on unimpeded. More than one collection of Lincoln stories began to appear in bookshops, and American people came eagerly after the tales about the "uncommon commoner." One of the more complete compendiums of the early 1900's was the work of a popular writer of that day, Wayne Whipple. One of his Lincoln anecdotes was gleaned from the recollections of a Civil War general and was couched in

² Charles Carleton Coffin, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1897), 426.

³ Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer, *Abraham Lincoln* (Philadelphia, 1904), 352.

these words: "It was related of President Lincoln that he rode out to Fort Stevens while the skirmishing was going on, and heedless of the danger, mounted the parapet to get a good view. While standing there his tall form presenting a prominent target, a bullet passed between him and a young lady, who was standing at his side He was then induced to descend under cover." ⁴

It is possible that a young woman stood with the President on the parapet, but it does not seem likely that Lincoln came down from his place because a bullet passed between him and the young lady. The Whipple-Townsend tale may seem unauthentic, but it adds to the narrative in its introduction of an unknown young woman, one of the few characters missing heretofore. The spot near the President must have been crowded on July 12, and it is slight wonder that Confederate marksmen struck down persons crowded together so closely.

Although American authors like to think of Abraham Lincoln as part and parcel of America, he has become, as John Drinkwater said, a world's Lincoln. Many writers of other nations have produced works on Lincoln, and more than one foreign author has written a biography of the American Civil War President. Some of the biographies were published shortly after the death of Lincoln, and others have

⁴ Wayne Whipple (comp.), *The Story-Life of Lincoln* (Philadelphia, 1908), 109. The anecdote is taken from E. D. Townsend, *Anecdotes of the Civil War*.

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found their way into print over a period of many years. One of the more scholarly studies from the pen of a foreign writer is the portrait of the American President given by an Englishman, Lord Charnwood. Although he was pressed for space in his single volume, Charnwood found place for this account:

The threat to Washington had been meant as no more than a threat, but the garrison was largely made up of recruits; reinforcements to it sent back by Grant arrived only on the same day as Early, and if that enterprising general had not wasted some previous days there might have been a chance that he could get into Washington, though not that he could hold it. As it was he attacked one of the Washington forts. Lincoln was present, exhibiting till the officers there insisted on his retiring, the indifference to personal danger which he showed on other occasions too.⁵

In this account, the officers insisted that the President retire to a place of safety. Lord Charnwood is most inclusive of army personnel, if naught else. This might have included General Horatio G. Wright, the young Captain Holmes, and the unidentified lieutenant colonel of the account by Lucius Chittenden. No American account of the incident makes mention of more than one officer insisting that the President come down from the parapet, but the biography by an Englishman adds a new twist to the tale by the introduction of "officers."

⁵ Godfrey Benson Rathbone, Lord Charnwood, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1917), 391.

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The Charnwood account was rather brief, but it was far more colorful than that of an American writer of the same day. This author was the noted George Haven Putnam, member of the publishing firm of that name. Putnam might have been one of the soldiers at Fort Stevens had not illness struck him down. His division was at the fort, and it is probable that he heard accounts of the skirmishing from his fellow soldiers. In recalling his memories of the Civil War, he gave a detailed account of the threat to Washington, but wrote only the following short sentence on the presence of Lincoln at the fort: "It was a portion of this fight that President Lincoln had the opportunity of looking at from the ramparts of Fort Stevens."⁶

Almost at the same time that Charnwood and Putnam were writing their versions of the event, an able journalist was preparing one of the more interesting single-volume biographies of Abraham Lincoln. James Morgan included many interesting details in a work that permitted slight deviation from a chronicle of the life of his subject. One of the bypath details in the Morgan biography was this brief reference to the march of Early's men on war-weary Washington:

A Confederate army dashed up to the city limits of Washington in July and skirmished in full view of the Capitol dome.

⁶ George Haven Putnam, *Memories of My Youth: 1844-1865* (New York, 1914), 341.

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The President himself visited the firing line and was in sight of the Confederates.⁷

Another of the better single-volume lives of Lincoln came from the hand of the able historian Nathaniel Wright Stephenson, but it presented little new material on the President at Fort Stevens. The Stephenson account was a potpourri of facts given by the artist Carpenter and those related by Nicolay and Hay. In giving his picture of Lincoln at the fort, Professor Stephenson wrote:

The next day, the eleventh of July, 1864, Washington was invested by the Confederate forces. There was sharp firing in front of several forts. Lincoln—and for that matter—Mrs. Lincoln also made a tour of the defenses. While Fort Stevens was under fire, he stood on the parapet, “apparently unconscious of danger, watching, with that grave and passive countenance the progress of the fight, amid the whizzing bullets of the sharp-shooters, until an officer fell mortally wounded within three feet of him, and General Wright peremptorily represented to him the risk he was was running.”⁸

Here were new garments fashioned from old. Professor Stephenson relied heavily on Carpenter and Nicolay and Hay for his account of Lincoln and his wife at Fort Stevens. He does not place the day

⁷ James Morgan, *Abraham Lincoln: The Boy and the Man* (New York, 1919), 258–59.

⁸ Nathaniel Wright Stephenson, *Lincoln: An Account of His Personal Life Especially of Its Springs of Action as Revealed and Deepened by the Ordeal of War* (Indianapolis, 1922), 362.

or days on which the President stood under fire, for he mentions sharp firing on July 11, and follows up with a reference to Lincoln standing on the parapet under fire. Nicolay and Hay, from whom the professor took a part of his account, asserted that General Wright ordered Lincoln from the parapet on July 12, but the difference in the dates is of slight significance. The important fact in the Stephenson account is the acceptance of the Wright recollections. Professor Stephenson was a historian trained in the rigid research methods of modern-day historical study, and his acceptance of the Wright account bears a certain amount of weight. Not only did Stephenson use the Wright tale, but he seems to have been the first of the modern biographers of Abraham Lincoln to use the recollections of Carpenter and to write of the presence of Mrs. Lincoln at Fort Stevens.

The Lincoln theme has not been exhausted, but a host of writers have striven with might and main to leave the cupboard bare. Volumes have appeared on the religion, the legal career, the paternity, and the presidency of Lincoln. Writers have made studies of the women whom Lincoln loved, and more than one author has written of the association of Abraham Lincoln with villages, towns, cities, and states. Included in the last group of works is a volume by Allen Clark on President Lincoln and the Capital City. In it is found an interesting account of the reaction of the author to the tale of a President under fire. In reference to a cartoon about the incident which was

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published in the *Washington Post* for October 7, 1902, he wrote:

In a newspaper is an illustration, with the title, "Lincoln under Rebel Fire," that has impressed the writer not in a serious way. On the parapet of Fort Stevens stands the President unheeding of enemy shells and the efforts of a soldier who with both hands is tugging at his coat-tails. The illustrator has executed on paper General Wright's polite threat:

"Mr. President, you must really get down from this exposed position. I cannot allow you to remain here longer and if you refuse I shall deem it my duty to have you removed under guard."

The President obeyed to the extent of taking a seat on an ammunition box from which he was constantly bobbing up to see what was going on.⁹

None of the anecdotes about President Lincoln at Fort Stevens referred to a soldier tugging at the presidential coattails. But the cartoonist of a Washington daily was not a historian, and he may have used that poetic license accorded to artists, but never to historians. He added zest to the tale, for he had included one of the few details missed by others: a private pulling his Commander in Chief from danger. The source of his authority for the use of the "polite threat" is unknown, but it may have been the Wright letter to Dr. Stevens. The General did not give his exact words in the letter, but

⁹ Allen C. Clark, *Abraham Lincoln in the National Capital* (Washington, 1925), 60.

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he gave an account from which the cartoonist might have fashioned the "threat." It is strange that the words which General Wright could not recall with certainty in 1870 were to appear as his quoted words in a Washington newspaper in 1902. The Wright command may not have impressed author Clark, but it may be that he had not read the accounts of those who had fought at Fort Stevens. Had these been available to him, he might have known that a Washington cartoonist had not erred completely in his brief and graphic tale. The Clark account added little new material to the narrative of President Lincoln at Fort Stevens, but it marked the beginning of the inclusion of the anecdote in the more recent books about the Civil War President.

When the prolific biographer Emil Ludwig turned his facile pen to the Lincoln field, he found a place for an account of President Lincoln and the Confederate sharpshooters. "He visited the forts, heard the whistling of the bullets, remained perfectly calm, wired to the general: 'Let us keep on the alert, but let us keep cool.' Welles describes him as sitting at noon in the shade, leaning against the breastwork of the fort, his back toward the enemy."¹⁰

The Ludwig account was a condensed mixture of several tales about Lincoln at Fort Stevens, and the Welles recollections were used to reveal the composure of the President in the face of a "threat" to the Northern Capital. Ludwig did not give the date of Lincoln's visit to the fort, but he erred in placing

¹⁰ Emil Ludwig, *Lincoln* (Boston, 1930), 417.

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him behind the parapet at noon, for Secretary Welles in 1864 had jotted down the fact that he had ridden out to the fort in "the P.M." of July 12. Regarding the advice to the general, who might have been Ulysses S. Grant, it is of interest to note a few sentences in a telegram sent by Lincoln to Thomas Swan and other worried citizens of near-by Baltimore: "By latest accounts the enemy is moving on Washington. They cannot fly to either place. Let us be vigilant, but keep cool. I hope neither Baltimore nor Washington will be sacked." ¹¹

The telegrams of July 10, 11, and 12, 1864, to General Grant include no advice for him to "keep cool." In fact, the utter coolness of the leader of the Army of the Potomac was a source of worry to the President. The inaccuracies in regard to Lincoln and his advice to the General may detract from the value of the Ludwig account, but it has one distinctive characteristic, for it was the first account to use the diary entries of Gideon Welles.

In the same year that Ludwig wrote his account, a well-traveled Wisconsin attorney wrote a study of Abraham Lincoln and the way that he had traveled. The work was a blend of Lincoln and Lincoln geography, and the Lincoln road took the Wisconsin traveler to Washington. In the national Capital he visited many places of interest because of their association with Abraham Lincoln. One of the visits took him to the Soldiers' Home, the former summer

¹¹ John G. Nicolay and John Hay (eds.), *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1905), X, 155.

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White House of the Civil War President. The home was not far from Fort Stevens, and some of the veterans who lived in it had heard tales of the fighting around the old fort. One of these veterans escorted the visitor from Wisconsin through the Soldiers' Home. The old fellow had not taken part in the fighting at Fort Stevens, but on being asked for a tale of the President under fire, he replied with a story which he had heard from other veterans of the battle: "After defeating General Lew Wallace, at Monocacy, General Early started for Fort Stevens. . . . The fort is nearly two miles from here, near Brightwood, and within sight of the Capital. Everybody who could bear arms went out to stop the raiders. President Lincoln joined them. Some of the officers tried to keep him under cover, fearing that some of the rebel sharpshooters might pick him off. He said that as commander of the army he ought to show himself as brave as the soldiers who were doing the fighting. With difficulty they got him away."¹²

The aged veteran's account was similar to that of Robert W. McBride in the reference to the President saying that he ought to show himself as courageous as his men. It also included a point noted only by Lord Charnwood: the fear of a number of officers for the safety of the President. Probably the old soldier had listened to a number of versions of the tale about Lincoln and the "Johnnies," and had blended his memories of the anecdotes into one.

¹² Fred L. Holmes, *Abraham Lincoln Traveled This Way: The Log Book of a Pilgrim to the Lincoln Country* (Boston, 1930), 274.

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The story of the old veteran offered no new material for the narrative and it did not compare in the richness of color with an account included in a study of Abraham Lincoln and the doctors with whom he had been associated. More than cursory study of materials evolved this entertaining description of incidents at Fort Stevens:

When General Early stormed Washington in 1864, Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln visited Fort Stevens to witness the battle of July 11. He, with a "plain clothes man" and a medical officer, stood on the parapet within range of a tree that concealed a rebel sharpshooter who was successful in picking off man after man. Mr. Lincoln refused all importunities to seek safety, until the medical officer was shot down by his side and he was "ordered off" the parapet by the officer in command, General Wright. Did the doctor stand there because of curiosity, or because of the honor and thrill of courting danger beside the President, or because of a generous thought that his bright uniform might have a selective action on a Minie ball? The motive is not as important as the fact that the sharpshooter chose the uniform in preference to the towering silk hat. So here are a cheer and a salute to that unremembered and until now unknown physician, whose name is presented in appreciative retrospect—Dr. C. C. V. A. Crawford, assistant surgeon, 102nd Pennsylvania Volunteers. Dr. Crawford recovered from his wound and was honorably discharged on November of the same year. His hospital cot, we may be sure, was one that Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln did not fail to visit.¹³

There were new details in the account by Dr. Shutes and also new characters: a "plain clothes man" and a

¹³ Milton H. Shutes, *Lincoln and the Doctors* (New York, 1933), 106.

sharpshooter in a near-by tree. The wonder of the narrative lies not fully in the fact that the President was ordered from the parapet, but rather in the fact that he was not crowded out of his place on the afternoons of July 11 and July 12.

A new detail was presented in the introduction of an almost unknown surgeon to the general public and Lincoln students, but the doctor was neither unknown to those who had fought with him, nor unremembered by them. John Cannon had revealed his identity thirty years before Dr. Shutes made him rather well known, and Colonel William Patton Griffith, a fellow Pennsylvanian, recalled the wounding of the surgeon Crawford.

Although Dr. Stevens placed the wounding of Surgeon Crawford on July 12, 1864, there is slight wonder that Dr. Shutes placed it on July 11. The men who had seen Crawford fall disagreed as to the day on which he was shot, and the records of the incident disagree. The official reports of officers at the fort list Dr. Crawford as one of those severely wounded on July 12, but Samuel P. Bates, the compiler and author of the *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers*, gives the date as July 11, 1864.¹⁴ At least in death, Dr. Crawford was to have surcease from the constant wounds of his days at Fort Stevens. Bates and the official reports were agreed on one thing: Surgeon Crawford recovered from his severe "wounds," and was discharged from the service on November 19,

¹⁴ Samuel P. Bates, *History of the Pennsylvania Volunteers* (1870), III, 653.

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1864, at the time of the expiration of his term of enlistment.

Dr. Shutes noted that President and Mrs. Lincoln had driven out to Fort Stevens, just as David Bull, the Reverend James H. Laird, Dr. Stevens, and Carpenter had done before him. It was with the strong support of historical evidence that the author of a study of Mrs. Lincoln as a White House hostess offered this account of the First Lady at Fort Stevens: "Washington stood agape listening to the sound of rebel cannon less than ten miles away. The Lincoln family was at its summer residence, the Soldiers Home, on the outskirts of the city about halfway between the outer line of fortifications at Fort Stevens and the city."

"Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln went to Fort Stevens during the skirmish and faced the fire of the rebel forces." ¹⁵

As Carpenter was one of the first men to write of Mrs. Lincoln's having been present, it was but natural that Virginia Kinnaird completed her account of the visit of Mrs. Lincoln to the fort with a repetition of the Carpenter tale of Mary Todd Lincoln and Secretary Stanton. Strangely enough, the Carpenter anecdote commanded only the attention of the historian Nathaniel Wright Stephenson and of Virginia Kinnaird.

The years after 1938 brought more than one

¹⁵ Virginia Kinnaird, "Mrs. Lincoln as a White House Hostess," in *Papers in Illinois History and Transactions* (Springfield, 1899-), LXV (1938), 82.

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description of Lincoln under fire, but it remained for that able seeker of the unknown about Lincoln, Dr. Emanuel Hertz, to unearth a variant of the anecdote told by Lucius E. Chittenden. It was a briefer account than that given by the Register of the Treasury and differed from the parent tale only in the number of rifles:

The President was at the battle of Fort Stevens and, standing in a very exposed position, he had apparently been recognized by the enemy. A young colonel of artillery, who appeared to be the officer of the day, walked to where the President was looking over the parapet and said: "Mr. President, you are standing within range of four hundred rebel rifles. Please come down to a safer place. If you do not, it will be my duty to call a file of men and make you."

"And you would do quite right, my boy!" said the President, coming down at once. "You are in command of the fort. I should be the last man to set an example of disobedience."¹⁶

The Colonel Wright account, for it was Thomas F. Wright who told the tale, contained no new material; it was the Chittenden recollections in different garb. As such, it held none of the element of surprise which is given in a brief account in one of the better picture biographies of Abraham Lincoln. Above a

¹⁶ Emanuel Hertz (comp.), *Lincoln Talks: A Biography in Anecdote* (New York, 1939), 485. The anecdote was related by Colonel Thomas F. Wright, a Major in the Sixth Infantry California Volunteers in 1864. He had risen to the rank of brevet brigadier general at the end of the Civil War. As he was in service in California in 1864, he probably heard the story from his army associates.

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photograph of Fort Stevens is a caption giving this unusual and rather original story: "Lincoln was literally under fire in July of that year, when Early's cavalry, in a desperate attempt to capture Washington, engaged in skirmishes at Fort Stevens, only four miles from Lincoln's summer cottage. Lincoln watched the fighting through his field glasses, saw an officer killed a few feet from where he was standing, and was peremptorily ordered by Stanton to go back to Washington and stay there."¹⁷

Although John Hay on July 10, 1864, noted the fact that Robert Todd Lincoln had told him Secretary Stanton had ordered the Lincolns to come in from the Soldiers' Home, none of the eyewitnesses at the fort nor the contemporaries of President Lincoln mentioned Stanton's ordering the President back to Washington. This does not necessarily disprove the authenticity of the anecdote, but it does seem that the President would have told Hay of the incident.

A picture life of Abraham Lincoln might not be expected to include an anecdote of the President under fire, but the most comprehensive biography would be expected to contain an account of the event. The poet-biographer Carl Sandburg disappoints neither lay reader nor Lincoln student in his work, for he offers a detailed account of the battle before Fort Stevens. With reference to the presence of President

¹⁷ Agnes Rogers, *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography in Pictures* (Boston, 1939). The pages in this work are not numbered, but the anecdote cited is above the photograph of Fort Stevens.

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Lincoln at the fort on July 11, he writes: "On one of the parapets Lincoln was a watcher and saw the first shots traded. He was too tall a target, said officers who insisted he put himself below the danger line." ¹⁸

This brief account by Sandburg is similar to the tale of the veteran soldier at the Soldiers' Home and the account given in the Charnwood biography, for all three mention the insistence of officers that President Lincoln remove himself from his place of danger.

July 12, 1864, presented a problem for the memories of many men, but, of this interesting day in the life of Lincoln, his best-known biographer writes: "While he stood watching this bloody drama a bullet whizzed five feet from him, was deflected, and struck Surgeon Crawford of the 102nd Pennsylvania in the ankle. While he yet stood there, within three feet of the President, an officer fell with a death wound. Those who were there that afternoon said he was cool and thoughtful, seemed unconscious of danger, and looked like a Commander in Chief." ¹⁹

Accounts of eyewitnesses at Fort Stevens differ as to the number of men who were shot down within a few feet of President Lincoln, but most of them are in agreement as to fact about the Commander in Chief leaving the parapet after the wounding of a surgeon. It may be interesting to note in passing that the officer of the Sandburg account and Surgeon

¹⁸ Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* (New York, 1939), III, 140.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

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Crawford were both within three feet of the President when they were struck down.

As Surgeon Crawford was a captain, it is possible that he and the officer of the Sandburg tale were one and the same man, but it should be recalled that Stephen Blanding wrote of two officers being picked off by Confederate sharpshooters. Blanding was in the fort at the time. Eyewitnesses wrote of the deflected bullet which wounded the surgeon, and it is possible that this detail in the Sandburg anecdote was gleaned from one of these accounts. Most persons agreed that Abraham Lincoln looked every inch the Commander in Chief on July 12, 1864, but apparently he did not appear so to Captain Holmes, who felt that he seemed "gaunt" and "careworn." Holmes may have seen the Lincoln of the Reverend Laird: "a weary farmer who was worried over the dry season."

The Sandburg account was a blend of several anecdotes of President Lincoln under fire, and it ended by giving General Wright the credit for "ordering" his superior officer from the parapet. Sandburg quoted Nicolay and Hay as to the Wright tale and gave the following description of the President amid a hail of bullets: "So it was probable the men 1,100 yards away were shooting that day at a man, any man on a rampart or in a trench who made a good target, though they would concede that a man six feet four in height was a shade easier to draw a bead on. Amid the whizzing bullets, wrote Nicolay and Hay, the President held to his place with grave . . .

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and passive countenance till finally General Wright peremptorily represented to him the needless risk he was running.”²⁰

The acceptance of the Wright anecdote by so outstanding a Lincoln scholar as Carl Sandburg is not conclusive proof of the authenticity of the tale, but it is interesting to note that the man who devoted a quarter of a century to creating a realistic Lincoln for the American people was on relatively solid ground. There were more eyewitnesses who attested to the authenticity of the Wright anecdote than to that of any other man, and the Wright tale might be sustained as good evidence by a thoughtful and impartial jury. As to the Confederates firing on any man on the afternoon of July 12, it is wholly probable that they were picking any targets presented to them, be they privates, officers, surgeons, or even the President. In fact, we have the word of the Reverend Laird that the Confederates had recognized Abraham Lincoln and were firing at the lanky target in black.

The Sandburg account offers certain details included in no other anecdote of Lincoln at Fort Stevens, and it reveals evidence of careful research and sifting of the evidence at hand. As a combination of several tales, it has one slight flaw: it offers no definite clue as to the person who ordered Abraham Lincoln from his place of danger. The finger is pointed at General Horatio G. Wright, though only through the words of John G. Nicolay and John Hay.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

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The Sandburg tale was not the last to be offered to the American people, but it was one of the most complete accounts of the incident given. It is possible that the anecdotes of Fort Stevens have not been exhausted, and one may crop up in the future to add to a theme that seems to be inexhaustible. Sandburg but added his bit to a colorful saga that had inception in the letter of David T. Bull.

Many different tales have been told; they have come from the lips and pens of many persons. Eyewitnesses like David T. Bull, Peter H. Kaiser, Robert W. McBride, James H. Laird, Edgar H. Hinman, and William Patton Griffith had memories that could unfold a most colorful, if not completely authentic, tale of Abraham Lincoln at Fort Stevens. These men had seen the President face Confederate rifles; Orville Browning, John Hay, Dr. George Thomas Stevens, and Francis B. Carpenter had not seen him, but these contemporaries of the President left records in diaries and books that are at times as colorful contribution to the anecdotage of Lincoln at the battle of Washington as the tales of the eyewitnesses. Strangely, one of the important eyewitnesses at Fort Stevens did not tell his tale to the American people directly, but offered it through the medium of the words of Dr. Stevens and William Van Zandt Cox. It was these men, the eyewitnesses, the contemporaries of President Lincoln and General Wright, who left the recollections from which later historians, biographers, and writers like Morse, Coffin, Charnwood, Oberholtzer, and Sandburg

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gleaned their accounts of a lanky Illinoisian facing the foe.

There were many tales of Abraham Lincoln under fire, but the most colorful one was yet to make appearance on the American scene: the anecdote of a young officer who became an illustrious Justice on the bench of the Supreme Court of a nation and a President who had led that nation through a bitter Civil War.

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"GET DOWN, YOU FOOL!"

MANY men saw President Lincoln under fire; several wrote of his presence at Fort Stevens, but one only, John Hay, mentioned the presence of youthful Captain Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. The tale of Lincoln and Holmes was to remain unknown to the mass of the American people during the lifetime of the great Justice, but it would not go with him to his grave. Mr. Justice Holmes recounted his amusing and entertaining tale to a few close friends, and it was brought to the attention of the noted raconteur Alexander Woollcott.

Woollcott was interested, for here was a story that had been told by an American who had risen to the Olympian heights attained by men like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and few others in the history of the United States. Alexander Woollcott related many an interesting anecdote, and he recounted the Holmes tale in his inimitable style. With the words of Harold J. Laski providing most suitable framework for the story, he

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sketched this word portrait of Lincoln¹ and Holmes at Fort Stevens :

Now on several of these occasions [visits to Arlington Cemetery]¹ Laski played escort, and once by way of prodding a little war reminiscence out of the old veteran he asked a few such primary questions as must have reminded his companion that here was an Englishman with only the most languid and meagre interest in American military history. Had the rebels ever come dangerously close to Washington? They had? Well, well. How close? Where were they? From the heights of Arlington the Justice was able to gesture with his stick towards the point of attack on Fort Stevens.

Then he laughed. "Where were they?" he repeated reminiscently. "You know the last person who asked me that question was Mr. Lincoln!" And he told of a day long past when, Lincoln having come out from the White House to inspect the defenses, the task of piloting him had fallen to Holmes. Lincoln too wanted to know just where the enemy were, and Holmes pointed them out. The President stood up to look. Now when standing up and supplemented by his high plug hat, Mr. Lincoln was a target of exceptional visibility. From the rebel marksman came a snarl of musketry fire. Grabbing the

¹ Mr. Justice Holmes went to Arlington Cemetery on September 13 in commemoration of the birthday of General John Sedgwick, his former commander in the Sixth Corps.

Sedgwick was killed in battle on May 9, 1864, and was succeeded in command by General Horatio Wright. Until the Corps was disbanded in 1865, Wright was the commander.

Holmes was aide-de-camp to General Sedgwick, serving under him from January, 1864, until the death of the general. Holmes served under General Wright as aide-de-camp from May, 1864, until he was mustered out of service on July 17, 1864. At the time of the battle of Fort Stevens, he was connected in no way with his old regiment, the Twentieth Massachusetts.

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President by the arm, the young officer dragged him under cover, and afterwards, in wave upon wave of hot misgiving, was unable to forget that in doing so he had said, "Get down, you fool!"

Admittedly this was not the approved style for an officer to employ in addressing the Commander in Chief of the armed forces of his country. The youthful aide was more relieved, when just as Mr. Lincoln was quitting the fort, he took the trouble to walk back.

"Good-bye Colonel Holmes," he said. "I'm glad to see you know how to talk to a civilian." ²

Woollcott placed July 12, 1864, as the day of the conversation between President Lincoln and Captain Holmes—the same day that rather good evidence reveals to have been the one on which General Wright ordered the President from the parapet. The evidence is not conclusive that but one man ordered Lincoln from the parapet on July 12, and it is possible that both General Wright and Captain Holmes gave him a command.

Woollcott ended his dramatic story with these interesting observations:

But surely it is now no mere guesswork that once under great provocation, Holmes did call Mr. Lincoln a fool, and that far from being offended Mr. Lincoln thought it was the mot juste.

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Professor Frankfurter admitted that he had heard the

² Alexander Woollcott, "Get Down, You Fool!" in *Atlantic Monthly* (Boston, 1857-), February, 1938, pp. 169-70.

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story before. . . . From whom had he heard it? "Why," the professor said mildly, "I heard it from Justice Holmes."³

It cannot be said that the Woollcott tale burst like a bombshell in the midst of a startled American people, for the public is not given to a mass reading of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine. It did come, however, as a surprise to the many friends of Mr. Justice Holmes and to some students of the lives of Lincoln and Holmes. Some looked on the tale as one made from whole cloth, but it did not prove easy to shrug a shoulder and to dismiss lightly the word of one who had corresponded frequently with Mr. Justice Holmes and gained the respect of the noted jurist. Some felt that it was possible that Woollcott had not related the tale as it had come to him, and that he had added colorful skeins to weave one of his better stories.

It seemed that there was good reason for Lincoln to inquire into the inspection of the defenses of Fort Stevens on July 12, 1864. He had gone out to the fort on July 10, and had stood under fire on the eleventh. Why was Captain Holmes detailed to escort the President around the defenses on the twelfth? Was Alexander Woollcott unaware of the fact that Lincoln had sketched on July 11, 1864, a diagram of the skirmish at the fort and the relative position of the troops for his telegraph-operator friends in the office of the War Department?

It does seem that Woollcott embellished the orig-

³ *Ibid.*, 172.

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inal anecdote with colorful detail, although he did not deviate from it intrinsically. He had the tale from Professor Laski, friend of Holmes, who told a simpler story in these words:

Mr. Justice Holmes only twice spoke to me of the Civil War; and I think he sought to repress the memory of it in his mind. But in 1931, I went out with him to Arlington Cemetery, where he wished to visit the grave of his old general. After we had stood there silently for some minutes, he pointed over to Fort Stevens, and said: "When I was in command of the 20th Massachusetts, President Lincoln came to visit the regiment. I remember him standing up gaunt and careworn, and asking where the enemy was. I pointed over to their direction, and as his height made him conspicuous, he was an obvious mark for the enemy, and the bullets began to swell. I lost my nerve and shouted at him, 'Get down, you fool!' He turned to me with an unforgettable smile, and said, a little drily, 'Colonel Holmes, I am glad you know how to talk to a civilian.'" I cannot, of course, put myself to the exact words, but I am quite certain of the adjectives "gaunt" and "unforgettable" and "careworn," and of the words he addressed to the President.⁴

The simple Laski tale is much like the longer and more colorful Woolcott anecdote which it fathered, but, like the Woolcott story, it includes certain details that may arouse skepticism. Certainly the memory of Mr. Justice Holmes was playing him false if he recalled meeting President Lincoln while in command of the Twentieth Massachusetts at Fort Stevens. The best evidence available at present re-

⁴ Professor Harold Laski to author, March 3, 1946.

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veals that Captain Holmes was never in command of the Twentieth Massachusetts, except for a day or so, and this because of the absence of a higher-ranking officer. Finally, as Holmes never attained a rank higher than captain while in the field, the skeptics may doubt that the President addressed him as Colonel Holmes.

But skeptics or no, the Laski account and its offspring, the Woollcott tale, caught the fancy of the lovers of a good anecdote about great Americans and of those authors who were interested in both Abraham Lincoln and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

One of the more ably penned works on Washington City in the days of President Lincoln includes parts of the Laski-Woollcott tale, which are interwoven with passages from other anecdotes of the President at Fort Stevens. There are few better descriptions of the march on Washington or of the skirmishes before Fort Stevens than those given by Margaret Leech. Her study of the incidents at the fort reveals good judgment in selection of the evidence at hand and a careful choice of details from a variety of stories:

Late on Tuesday afternoon, a brigade of Sixth Corps was ordered to make an assault for the purpose of driving Confederate sharpshooters from two houses, situated on either side of the Seventh Street Road. A number of notable civilians had congregated in Fort Stevens: the President, some members of the Cabinet and of Congress, and other Government officials. Mrs. Lincoln had driven out with her husband, and several other ladies had accompanied General Wright and his staff. The hill beside the fort was occupied by other spectators, in-

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fluent enough to secure passes, and sufficiently adventurous to tolerate, from the shelter of trees and bushes, the whizzing of bullets from the enemy's long-range rifles.

. . . As the rebels at last gave way, the civilians at Fort Stevens clapped their hands and shouted.

This sharp skirmish was the President's only opportunity of seeing troops in action. Both on Monday and Tuesday, with nearly half of his tall form exposed above the parapets, he was under fire at Fort Stevens. During the charge of Bidwell's brigade, he clambered on top of the parapet, where General Wright and a few others were standing. A sharpshooter's bullet killed a surgeon within three feet of Lincoln. The President remained after Wright had cleared the parapet of everyone else, and the general ordered him to withdraw. Wright's remonstrance was couched in dignified, if peremptory terms; and it was left for his exasperated young aide, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver Wendell Holmes, to shout at the Chief Executive, "Get down, you fool."⁵

The Leech account is a melting pot of tales from the pen of Carpenter, Dr. Stevens, Cox, and others. It is as reliable as wise selection of available evidence can make it, for it is based on the recollections of more than one witness to the fighting and of more than one contemporary of President Lincoln. It may be that all of the incidents mentioned did not occur; it is possible that each and every one of them took place, for there is evidence to sustain each fact presented by Margaret Leech, with the possible exception of one or two. Lincoln might have argued, with a twinkle in his eye, that he was invited to accompany General

⁵ Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington: 1860-1865* (New York, 1941), 342-43.

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Wright to the parapet and that he did not clamber on top of it in manner unbecoming one of his position. Mr. Justice Holmes might have contended that the youthful Captain was not exasperated at the time of his calling his Commander in Chief a fool. And the records would argue that the impetuous officer was but a captain at the time, holding a rank of brevet lieutenant colonel.

The account given in *Reveille in Washington* is not the Woolcott tale, for it discards many of the features of his anecdote. The Leech account becomes a colorful tale, for it included with wisdom the elements of many stories of Lincoln at Fort Stevens in order to present a well-rounded study of exciting days in an old fort of Washington City.

Miss Leech gave but a line to Captain Holmes; his story is told more fully in a gracefully written biography of Mr. Justice Holmes and his noted family. The author of the justly popular *Yankee from Olympus* has mingled some excerpts from the Laski account with others to present this picturesque tale of Captain Holmes and his Commander in Chief:

Out the Seventh Street Road to Fort Stevens marched Wright's brigades in the hot July morning. Lincoln went with them in a carriage with his wife. Holmes rode with Wright and other staff officers. Some Washington ladies came all the way to the fort, but all visitors left that night. Only Lincoln himself came back to the fort the next day. Below the parapets, on the rolling ground Early's troops lay waiting. Wright decided to attack immediately.

The President climbed a parapet. He had never seen a battle.

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What he had seen, year after year, week after week, was the young recruits, marching by the White House, singing. He had seen them return in ambulances over the long bridge to the crowded hospitals where he had gone to visit them, standing hat in hand by their beds. Now he was to see them in action.

The firing began. "You had better get out of the fire," General Wright said. The President did not move. Even without his tall hat, he stood six feet four, a splendid target. Below him on the dusty ground, men ran forward and fell sprawling on their faces. This was the thing for which Lincoln felt responsible. This was the thing he had dreaded, this was the picture he had seen so often at the dead of night and that had caused him to leave his bed and pace the floor until morning. . . . On the parapet five feet from him a man fell. Three feet away, so close that Lincoln could have touched him, an officer fell dead.

"Get down, you fool!" a young voice shouted. Automatically the President stepped back. It was Wendell Holmes, angry and terrified. From the protection of the bulwark, Lincoln looked down at the white face, streaked with dirt, the brown hair wild. . . . "Captain," he said, "I am glad you know how to talk to a civilian."⁶

There is a certain poetic artistry in the tale by Catherine Drinker Bowen which should make definite appeal to those lovers of anecdotes about Lincoln. But oftentimes poetry runs afoul of history. A lone Lincoln did not appear at the fort on July 12, 1864. Dr. Stevens conversed with the President and his lady on the afternoon of that day, and "gossipy Gideon" Welles saw the President at the fort on the same afternoon. At that time Secretary of the Navy

⁶ Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Yankee from Olympus* (Boston, 1944), 193-94.

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Welles not only saw Lincoln, but he conversed with "Bluff Ben" Wade, who was watching the fighting.

Here is no new anecdote of Lincoln under fire, but a tale with new twists and colorful lights of fancy playing through it. There is momentary variation from the usual tale, for a man falls five feet distant from the President. However, there is immediate return to uniformity; an officer is stricken down within three feet of his Commander in Chief. One might wonder at the frequent manufacture of yard measures in the days of President Lincoln. But uniformity with other tales is found but rarely in the Bowen account. The Commander in Chief is not dragged under cover by the young Captain, as in the Woollcott tale, nor does he wait to address the young officer until his time of departure from the fort. Strangely, President Lincoln does not address Holmes as Colonel, but by his correct title, Captain. Was he accurate, or did Miss Bowen have better knowledge of the rank of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., than his Commander in Chief had?

In view of the existence of many versions of the tale of Lincoln at Fort Stevens, discrepancies cannot be said to be present in the Bowen account. There is no picture of a parapet crowded with visitors for some time before General Wright ordered the parapet cleared, nor of Edwin Stanton bustling busily about the fort to get firsthand information as to the progress of the battle. There is just a fresh picture of the Lincoln and Holmes presented in the Laski-Woollcott tale.

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Almost fifteen eyewitnesses had penned their recollections of a President under fire; seven of his contemporaries had written of the incident; Mr. Justice Holmes told the tale to at least three known persons, and possibly to many others. In all of these anecdotes there is some difference in detail. Some accounts note the presence of Lincoln at Fort Stevens on three days; others mention but two. Mrs. Lincoln is said to have accompanied her husband to the fort; she is said to have been absent from the fort. The President was advised to come down from the parapet, urged to seek safety, remonstrated with, ordered down peremptorily, and withal, termed a “fool” by at least two persons. He was “ordered down” by General Wright, an anonymous colonel of artillery, and Private Bedient; entreated by his wife to leave the fort; and called a fool by a noted graduate of Harvard and by a Washington Negress. An officer fell within three feet of the President; another dropped five feet distant from him; an officer was shot dead near by; two were mortally wounded at his side; a surgeon within reach of his hand fell sprawling in the dirt. Confusion; all was confusion in the tales. A Cleveland journalist tried to fashion an apparently valid tale from the conflicting anecdotes. With this purpose in mind, he wrote:

As Gen. Horatio Wright gave the command to advance, he climbed upon the parapet of Fort Stevens. . . . Lincoln followed him, quite unmindful of his danger, and several of the group joined them. Officers and aides ranged along either side.

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There was a smart fire from the enemy and the sharpshooters turned their rifles upon the exposed men. Several of them were killed, one surgeon, within three feet of Lincoln, falling dead at the President's feet.

Wright ordered all off the parapet. But he chose to remain, and the president obstinately followed suit. Elizabeth Thomas, an old colored woman, whose property adjoined the fort, hovering about in the distance, sought shelter in the basement of the fort, and sensing the president's danger, screamed to him to "get down."

Wright remonstrated in vain with the President. It remained for a lieutenant colonel to couch the command in words that brought action. "Get down, you damned fool," he shouted, and Lincoln complied.

Interesting it is that this young officer was the son of a noted poet-physician, renowned for his wit, and later himself to be noted for the delivery from the bench of the United States Supreme Court of decisions as common-sense and emphatic as the one rendered that day.⁷

The account by the Cleveland newspaperman has little significance except as an attempt to fuse together in one connected tale the contradictory details of many others. It is possible that the content of the newspaper account may be authentic, for the fact that General Wright ordered down the President may not have prevented Captain Holmes from calling him a "fool," or "Aunt Betsy" Thomas from screaming advice to those near Lincoln at the moment. Skeptics may doubt that all three ordered

⁷ Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, February 16, 1943. From "When President Lincoln Went Under Fire" by Harlowe Hoyt. The complete article will be found on the editorial page of the newspaper.

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the President from the parapet, but the one way to disprove these tales is by the adduction of conclusive historical evidence, a thing that does not exist in a study of Abraham Lincoln at Fort Stevens. Newspaperman Hoyt does not accept the statement of General Wright that he invited Lincoln to accompany him to the parapet nor does he mention the work of “Aunt Betsy” in the fort.

The account reveals acceptance of the Holmes tale, although in slightly different version than that offered by others. Profanity does not seem the proper style of address to a President and Commander in Chief, and the Hoyt account may contain too much spice for some readers.

Was the Holmes anecdote true, or was it but another memory of an old man? To term it such is to tread on dangerous ground, for those who knew Mr. Justice Holmes credited him with a phenomenal memory. Even in the last years of a long life, the Justice could recall many Greek passages learned in his youth. His was a mind trained for memory, one that could summarize a lengthy Supreme Court case in a few terse paragraphs and omit no essential element. Even at ninety, the mind of Mr. Justice Holmes had the tenseness of a fine watch spring.

In the winter of 1934, the author wrote to Mr. Justice Holmes and asked him if he had recollections of Lincoln, as it was known that the President was a great admirer of the poem “The Last Leaf” by the father of the Justice. The jurist was watching twilight settle on a life that had flashed with brilliant

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sunlight. The hand that had fashioned some of the greatest prose in the English language was used no longer for correspondence. A gracious secretary replied for the Justice in these words: "Mr. Justice Holmes has asked me to write to you for him to say how much he appreciates the kind things you said in your letter. He regrets that he cannot repay your kindness by letting you have some Lincoln reminiscences, but he has really nothing to say about Lincoln. He is sure that you will understand that his silence is only the result of having nothing to say."⁸

Four years later a tale of Lincoln and Holmes appeared, but there was no inconsistency in the answer of Justice Holmes to the author and the appearance of the Woolcott anecdote. Mr. Justice Holmes was a most private man; his intimate reminiscences did not become the property of little-known strangers. He had sent gracious word to the stranger; he had given generous answer, but had kept his recollections for those close to him.

The story of Abraham Lincoln and the young captain was forgotten by the author until "Aunt Betsy" Thomas arose to dispute the claims of Mr. Justice Holmes. Actually, she did not contradict the Justice, for she merely said that she had screamed at the President on the same day that Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., had termed him a most unwise fellow in words slightly less than polite.

The secretary who had penned the letter of 1934 had known Holmes intimately; he might throw light

⁸ Mark DeWolfe Howe to author, March 7, 1934.

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on the tale of Lincoln and Holmes. A letter to him brought this answer: "I know that when I visited Fort Stevens with the Justice, though he told me where Lincoln was standing at the Fort, he said nothing about any dealings which he had with him."⁹

There seemed to be good basis for skepticism about the Woolcott tale, and such doubt was increased by word from another former secretary to Justice Holmes. This secretary, former Attorney General Francis Biddle, the author of a brief pen portrait of Holmes, recalled these memories of a visit with his chief on the site of old Fort Stevens: "I have never been certain of the authenticity of Woolcott's story. I know that the Justice saw Lincoln at the time, but I was under the impression from what he told me that he never talked to the President. However, Woolcott's authority seems to be Mr. Justice Frankfurter, if I remember correctly, than which there could be no better."¹⁰

Citation of Mr. Justice Frankfurter as authority for the Woolcott story attains greater interest in the light of a statement from Margaret Leech, the author of a most restrained version of the Lincoln-Holmes anecdote. In answer to an inquiry as to the source of her account, she wrote: "You are quite right in believing that my authority for the Fort Stevens incident is Alexander Woolcott. He had the story from Justice Frankfurter to whom Justice Holmes told it near the end of his life. It is important

⁹ *Id.* to *id.*, September 14, 1942.

¹⁰ Former Attorney General Francis Biddle to *id.*, May 12, 1943.

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to remember that Holmes was a very young man at the time. Possibly the reason for his concealing the anecdote for so many years was due to his embarrassment, as a mature man, at the undignified and impetuous way in which he had addressed his Commander-in-Chief.”¹¹

It may be noted at this point that Woollcott did not cite Mr. Justice Frankfurter as the source of his tale. He stated merely that the Justice had heard the tale before, and from the lips of Mr. Justice Holmes. But had the present Associate Justice heard the Laski-Woollcott tale from Holmes, or had the philosopher of the law told him a different version of the anecdote? In answer to an inquiry about the tale which he heard from Mr. Justice Holmes, Mr. Justice Frankfurter sent the following informative reply: “I have not Alexander Woollcott’s account of the Fort Stevens incident at hand. But I believe it to be essentially accurate, for I did hear it from the Justice’s own mouth. He did say to a stranger whom for the moment he did not recognize as President Lincoln, more in anxiety than in irritation, some such words as “Get down, you damn fool, before you get shot.”¹²

“Whom for the moment he did not recognize”; here was a new twist to the Holmes tale. Captain Holmes had not known the person whom he had addressed. Justice Frankfurter did not stress the point,

¹¹ Margaret Leech Pulitzer to *id.*, May 24, 1943.

¹² Mr. Justice Felix Frankfurter to *id.*, May 19, 1943.

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but he hastened to emphasize it in a letter which followed close on the heels of its predecessor. In this he wrote: "I hasten to write you in order to clear away a wrong impression that my last note must have conveyed. It is quite an understatement to say that Captain Holmes was 'not fully aware of the fact that he was addressing the President.' The point is that he was wholly unaware of who it was until a sharp look after his exclamation made him aware." ¹³

Mr. Justice Frankfurter heard the tale from the lips of his friend Mr. Justice Holmes, but it was no facsimile of the Woolcott tale. There was no dramatic scene in which a young captain escorted his Commander in Chief on a tour of Fort Stevens; no exciting moment in which a young man from Harvard dragged his chief from his place of danger; no irritated aide-de-camp to General Wright who called President Lincoln a "fool" under just provocation. It would appear that Captain Holmes was more anxious than angry at the moment. There was no Wendell Holmes filled with misgivings as to his words; there was only an officer who had glanced at an unknown civilian standing in the line of fire. The young officer had blurted out his thoughts at the moment. In regard to the doubts which are said to have filled the mind of Holmes, these words of Mr. Justice Frankfurter offer another picture of Holmes: "Of course I do not think that Justice Holmes was 'ashamed of the way in which he addressed Lincoln.'

¹³ *Id. to id.*, May 24, 1943.

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He told the story as a natural exclamation of one who saw another offering himself as a target to bullets." ¹⁴

It seems that Mr. Justice Holmes was not a man fearful of his words or actions; he expressed himself as he felt at the moment. As to the reason for his seeming silence as to Lincoln, it may be well to remember the words of Mr. Justice Frankfurter: ". . . he was not a man who lived much in the past and he dreaded anecdote." ¹⁵

Shortly after the President stood under fire at Fort Stevens, General Horatio Wright commissioned the noted artist George Frederick Wright to paint a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. Was it possible that at the time of the sitting the General had told the artist a good tale of Lincoln and the Confederate sharpshooters? A letter to a daughter of the artist brought answer. Miss Wright had never heard the Holmes-Lincoln tale from her father, but suggested that Miss Esther Owen, a friend, might know of the anecdote. A letter to that lady brought forth this recollection of a tale recounted by Mr. Justice Holmes: "Woolcott always told a good story well, but I feel that Justice Frankfurter's is supreme authority—especially on the story you are inquiring about. I heard the story from Uncle Wendell himself and remember it in the same form, including the fact that he did not know to whom he was speaking." ¹⁶

¹⁴ *Id.* to *id.*, March 17, 1945.

¹⁵ *Id.* to *id.*, March 29, 1946.

¹⁶ Miss Esther B. Owen to *id.*, July 12, 1943.

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“Uncle Wendell” made himself known to a host of Americans; Miss Esther Owen may be but another name to the people, and so we let her introduce herself to the public in her own words: “First to explain the connection between Justice Holmes and the undersigned. The Justice not only married my mother’s sister Fanny Dixwell, but was so near and dear a friend that he had his special home in the Dixwell home long before that marriage. He always treated us as his own nieces and was as near to us as our bona fide uncles. As I spent much time with my grandparents in Cambridge I was fortunate in the opportunities to visit and afterward correspond with both Justice and Mrs. Holmes.” ¹⁷

Mr. Justice Holmes not only told the story to Professor Laski and Mr. Justice Frankfurter, but he recounted it for his niece. At least three persons were ready to vouch for its authenticity, and others had heard the anecdote. All doubts in this regard were allayed by Miss Owen, as she wrote this passage in a later letter: “I cannot give you any definite answers as to when, where, before whom, or how often I heard the Lincoln story. I think it would be safe to say—a number of times, not later than 1898, and in the presence of others—usually with other reminiscences of his youth.” ¹⁸

“Not later than 1898”; Mr. Justice Holmes had recounted his tale before he reached the age of sixty years. At least, this man of phenomenal memory had not awaited the “plucking” of his ears to offer

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, March 21, 1945.

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his recollections of a meeting with Abraham Lincoln. He was so unashamed of the incident that he recounted it several times for friends and relatives, and this at a time when he was at the peak of those mental powers known so well to the American people.

The tale of Lincoln under fire may have to undergo changes. It may have to reveal a picture of two men standing together: the one, a tall man clad in black; the other, a smaller man dressed in the blue of the Union armies. The two stand on a parapet of a Washington fort, arguing over the danger to which the lanky man from the prairies has exposed himself. The tall fellow is the object of anxiety on the part of Mary Todd Lincoln. He refuses to leave his place on the parapet, while the smaller man continues to plead and argue the case. A slender young officer glances up from his place within the fort; bullets are kicking up dust at the feet of the two men. The officer within the fort grows anxious over the safety of the foolish civilian who has offered himself as a target for Confederate marksmen exacting their toll of Union soldiers. He glances quickly at the lank figure on the parapet and, without any further thought, shouts, "Get down, you damn fool, before you get shot." The "fool" was just a civilian to Captain Holmes; only later does he turn and recognize his Commander in Chief, the war-weary President of the United States.

Such an anecdote may not be the colorful tale of a Woolcott, but what a splash of color that explosive "damn" would have added to a good anecdote by the

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noted raconteur. Color or no, the tale includes the Holmes anecdote as Mr. Justice Frankfurter heard it from the lips of his friend and as Esther Owen heard it from "Uncle Wendell." The skeptics may persist in their rejection of the tale; they may term it apocryphal, but the recollections of Mr. Justice Holmes during his fifties, the authority of Mr. Justice Frankfurter, and the memories of Professor Laski, good friend and frequent correspondent of Holmes, are not to be disregarded. Neither can the word of Miss Owen be ignored, for she heard the anecdote on more than one occasion. The story related to Mr. Justice Frankfurter may prove to be more authentic and colorful than the longer Woollcott tale.

At least there are these satisfying points about the Frankfurter-Owen version of the anecdote: Captain Holmes did not knowingly "damn" President Lincoln and add insult to injury by calling him a "fool." Those who could not believe that Holmes would deliberately call Lincoln a fool can take consolation in the fact that the Justice did not recognize the President until after he had uttered the impetuous command. Holmes was a man of courage, but being an officer he knew military etiquette. He knew that it did not take courage, but sheer impudence and audacity knowingly to call his Commander in Chief "a fool," or worse yet, "a damned fool." For the skeptics who doubted the authenticity of a tale because of its late arrival in the long life of Holmes, there is the answer of Esther

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Owen: the tale was told while Holmes was yet in the prime of life.

It is fascinating and it may be that two men know it exactly—the one, a prince among “retailers” of American yarns; the other, a philosopher of the law whose twinkling eyes revealed a deep well of humor. It may be that these two sit on an American Olympus and chuckle over the yarn; it may be that Abraham Lincoln laughs heartily with a former captain in his army who once damned him as a fool. All of the foregoing is unhistorical theory; all that is known is the fact that President Lincoln and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., were under fire at Fort Stevens and that later Mr. Justice Holmes told an anecdote about a meeting with Lincoln at the fort. One fact of more than passing importance should command attention: the venerable Justice was not given to anecdotage, neither was he given to offering unimportant recollections of his life. Like Abraham Lincoln, Holmes told a story well; like the famous President, he enjoyed one. Mr. Lincoln told a humorous yarn to John Hay on July 11, and he may have chuckled on July 12 at a fellow who was less severe with him than the contemporary press. The Holmes-Lincoln tale is a good one; it seems that it may take its place with the better tales of Lincoln, but such decision rests with the reader.

And what of the other tales, accounts, and anecdotes? The Holmes story does not necessarily disprove them; neither do they disprove the authenticity of the Holmes tale. Private Bedient may have tossed

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a jocular remark in the direction of the President on July 11, 1864, and Captain Holmes may have profaned an unrecognized civilian on July 12. It does seem unlikely that General Wright, Captain Holmes, "Aunt Betsy" Thomas, and an anonymous colonel nagged at Lincoln, scolded him, and ordered him down from his place of danger, all within the space of a few minutes, but there is no conclusive historical evidence to disprove their tales.

Historical evidence would seem to justify the acceptance of the following matters: the fact that President Lincoln was under fire on two days in July, 1864; that men were shot down near him; that Mrs. Lincoln and General Wright stood with him on the parapet. The preponderant weight of evidence offered by eyewitnesses leans heavily in favor of the tale by General Wright, but there is good evidence that Captain Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., may have amused and startled Abraham Lincoln with his impetuous and undignified command.

No one of the tales of Lincoln under fire need be accepted completely; no one of them need be discarded fully. There are errors in the anecdotes such as the lapses in the memory of aged Colonel Griffith. The test of each tale lies in analysis of the evidence presented. Some of the accounts may seem to be more acceptable than others, and these may be selected as the evidence seems to dictate. It does seem that one of the most acceptable is the story from the lips of Mr. Justice Holmes. It does seem that a "Yankee from Olympus" and a "Man for the Ages" met on a little

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battlefield of a great Civil War, and their chance encounter left a choice bit of Americana for the enjoyment of those great lovers of a good yarn: the American people.

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